

*The Return
of Blue Pete
Luke Allan*



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THE RETURN OF BLUE PETE

LUKE ALLAN

THE RETURN OF BLUE PETE

BY

LUKE ALLAN

AUTHOR OF "BLUE PETE: HALF-BREED," "THE LONE TRAIL,"
"THE BLUE WOLF," ETC.

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THE RETURN OF BLUE PETE. II

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THE RETURN OF BLUE PETE

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CHAPTER I

MAHON ON THE TRAIL

SERGEANT MAHON emptied the barracks mail bag on the desk before Inspector Barker and stood awaiting instructions. The Inspector passed his hand over the small pile of letters and let his eye roam from one to another in the speculative way that added zest to the later revelation of their contents.

One from headquarters at Regina he set carefully aside. With an "ah!" of satisfied expectancy he selected one from the remainder and placed it before him. Mahon was mildly interested. The little foibles of his superior were always amusing to him. Eyes still fixed on the envelope, the Inspector commenced to fill his pipe.

"Spoiling for a job, Mahon?"

"Depends."

"Hm-m! Beautifully non-committal."

Mahon's interest was rising. The Inspector went on calmly cramming in the tobacco. When the job

was completed to his liking, he thrust the pipe between his lips, flicked a loose flake from his tunic, and forgot to apply a match. Instead, he picked up the envelope and examined it on all sides. Mahon began to grow impatient.

Twice the Inspector turned the letter over. Mahon fretted. He could see on its face the Division headquarters stamp—Lethbridge—but why all this ceremony and pother about an official note that came almost every day? He recalled suddenly that his wife would be holding lunch for him—with fresh fish he had seen unloaded little more than an hour ago from the through train from Vancouver. He could almost smell it sizzling on the natural gas cooker.

“Hm-m!” The envelope was not yet broken. “I imagine this will interest you, Mahon.”

Suddenly the Inspector dived into a drawer and, taking from it an official looking envelope, passed it back to the Sergeant. The latter accepted it with fading interest. The Assistant Commissioner at Regina was unfolding to Inspector Barker’s immediate superior, the Superintendent at Lethbridge, an unexciting tale of crime. Crime was their daily diet, and this was located far beyond their district.

Somewhere away up north, hundreds of miles beyond the jurisdiction of the Medicine Hat unit of the Mounted Police, events of concern to the Police were happening along the line of the transcontinental railway now under construction. Certain acts of sabotage—tearing down railway trestles and bridges, undermining trains, displacing grade, tampering with rails

and switches—were not only hampering construction but endangering life. And things were growing worse. In addition there was complaint of horse-stealing at one isolated camp.

The point of the letter was contained in the last paragraph. Could Superintendent Magwood spare an experienced bushman and trailer to go north and take temporary charge?

Mahon handed the letter back with a laugh.

"Bit of a joke, horse-stealing from contractors who only last year grabbed every stolen horse offered them. Retribution!"

The Inspector swung about on his swivel chair.

"We never discovered who got those horses."

"The ones Blue Pete stole?" A cloud came to Mahon's face. "Not exactly the contractors who got them, but there was no doubt where they went."

"I always regretted we had to hand over the search just there to a Division that knows little about ranch horses," murmured the Inspector. "Still—perhaps—" He stopped and shifted the letter he held from one hand to the other, as if weighing it.

"We'd have made short work of it, sir."

"Even if we'd implicated your halfbreed friend?" The older man was peering beneath his iron-grey brows.

"I'm afraid nothing more was needed to implicate Blue Pete," sighed Mahon.

"For a halfbreed rustler he seems to have stamped himself on your imagination, Boy." They had called Mahon "Boy" almost since he joined the force seven

years before as a young man, packed with youthful vitality, frankness and ambition, and the nickname was dear to him.

"But he wasn't always a rustler. I remember him only for the two years he spent unofficially in the Force, the best rustler-buster we ever had. That was the real Blue Pete. That he died a rustler was due to crooked 'justice.' Poor old Pete! If only he hadn't had the Indian strain!"

"He wouldn't have been so useful to us. His uncanny scent on the trail— By the way, Mahon, strange we never found trace of him—his grave or something—when you're so certain how and where he died. And where's that ugly pinto of his? Whiskers, he called her, wasn't it?"

"Mira found the body, sir—that last letter she sent us said as much. She'd hide him from us—it's exactly the thing she would do. She was a loyal wife—"

"Not quite a wife."

"A wife as truly as absence of formal ceremony can make one. He's lying out there somewhere in the heart of the Hills he loved. . . . They were a sentimental pair."

"Almost too much sentiment in Mira Stanton for you," chuckled the Inspector. "When I think of how near a thing it was—"

"I was a fool, sir." Mahon's face was red. "But it wasn't because I was too good for her. We'd never have pulled together; I know that now. She was born and bred in the wild ways. I respect her as much as I ever did—perhaps more because she has

steadfastly refused even to let us know where she is—we who sent her down and indirectly killed the man she loved.”

“I suppose you’ve talked all this over with your wife, young man?”

“Yes, sir. Helen, though reared in such a different atmosphere from her cousin, understands Mira better than I. She sympathises—”

“But where is she—Mira, I mean? We know she’s drawing the profits regularly from the 3-bar-Y. But that foreman of hers is as mute as a clam. . . . And now Bert, her best cowboy, has disappeared. Hm-m! What d’ye make of it, Mahon?”

It was not like the Inspector to draw the opinions of his staff, and Mahon regarded him slyly.

“You have a theory, sir. I haven’t. I only see what’s clear. Mira’s over in Montana—”

“And so you think Mira Stanton is living on her past in Montana—gamboling about with Whiskers, I suppose? And Blue Pete lies in the Hills? Comfortable disposal of the whole affair. I envy you.”

“I’ve searched the Hills in all his old haunts, sir—”

“And I’m darn glad you didn’t find him.”

The Inspector tore open the letter in his hand, smiled, and passed it back.

“You have a copy of the Assistant Commissioner’s letter to me of the tenth,” it ran. “In observance of his orders I would suggest that you send Sergeant Mahon, who is, I believe, the best for the purpose in the Division.”

Mahon flushed. A gleam of boyish excitement made him look five years younger. Eagerly he searched the Inspector's face.

"I'd like it, sir. I'd do my best. I've done bush work in the Hills, and Blue Pete knocked something into me about trails."

"It always surprises me," began the Inspector maliciously, "how eager young husbands are to get away—"

"May I take Helen, sir?"

"No—you—may—not! What do you think this is—a honeymoon? In the first place you'll probably be located in some defunct end-of-steel village where even the ghosts are abominable. In the next place you'll be too busy to know you're married. Horse-thieves? Bah! This is different stuff. You'll be up against something new. We've more than a suspicion that those devils, the Independent Workers of the World, are at the bottom of it. When you get on the trail of the I.W.W., Boy, there'll be no chivalry of the plains. It'll be knives, and poison, and dynamite . . . and darkness for deeds of darkness. All the criminals you've met are saints compared with these foreign devils. Thank the Lord, they've come no further from the States as yet than the construction camps!"

He rose and deliberately removed the tunic that was to him the badge of office.

"Speaking unofficially," he observed, "my advice is to shoot first and enquire after. Remember that every Pole and Russian and Hungarian there carries

a knife or a slug—he has to in self-protection—and uses it as we do slang. Every foreign workman on a railway construction gang is a potential murderer. . . . I'd rather give evidence for you on a murder charge than strew flowers on your grave."

He reached for his tunic.

"You'll have a chance to do credit to Blue Pete's memory. . . . About Helen—wait till we see what size the cloud is."

He thrust his arms into the tunic and buttoned it tight to his chin.

"You leave on Saturday," he growled.

CHAPTER II

EVENING AT MILE 130

“DADDY!”

Big Jim Torrance, framed in the doorway of the shack, was deaf to everything but the scene before him.

“Daddy!” There was a note of impatience in the girl’s voice. “I know what you’re doing—” She appeared in the doorway between kitchen and living room, enamel pan in one hand and a dish towel in the other. “Of course! That horrid trestle—always that trestle! And you might have been helping with the pans. You know how they stain my hands.”

But the noise of the distant camp, lounging out now from the night meal, crowded what small interstices of his attention remained from the beloved trestle.

Out before him, painted in the vivid mesmeric colours of evening, lay a vista dear to him—a new railway built in silent places. Across the yellow grade the bush of Northern Canada stretched on and on, not thick just here, but prophetic of the untracked forests beyond. On his left a great cleft cut the earth, an eleven hundred yard valley, in the middle of which ran a river, sweeping into sight up there round the bend from the deep green of the bush—running placidly enough until it struck the foaming rapids above the trestle—then smoothing into quiet current

and swinging back through the chasm to disappear into the unknown behind the shack.

Five hundred yards up the wide bottom of the valley the construction camp sprawled its ugly mass. From where he stood in the doorway he looked down on it over the grade—its straggling unformed planning; the flimsy shacks, half unhewn logs, half canvas, without respect for streets or angles or lines; its half-hearted struggle to lift itself up the slope to the sheltered forest above.

A disreputable, careless, disgusting picture of hardened man catering only to his simplest needs. In large part the survival of previous grade and bridge camps which had merely picked up their canvas when they moved along, it had been patched up with more disreputable canvas, now mouldy and torn, with bits of roof gone here, and windows and doors missing there. The very dregs even of construction camps. Big Jim Torrance himself had used it first on grade and had sold the portable parts to a contractor with work further west. Then O'Connor, the first contractor to tackle the trestle, had shoved his men into what was left with orders to do their damndest. And now Torrance again, having taken over the task O'Connor had funk'd in a moment of panic.

Half a thousand bohunks* were existing there now, five hundred of the wildest foreigners even Torrance had handled. But they were *his* gang. And Mile 130 was *his* camp. That thought had impelled

* The term applied to foreign laborers, especially on railway construction.

him once to punch the head of a leering engineer who rashly ventured to call it "Torrance's pig-sty" in Torrance's hearing. The camp might go to perdition so far as he was concerned, but he wasn't going to have any rank outsider shoving it along.

With a determined little set to her lips, her only inheritance from her father, Tressa Torrance passed through the living room and seized him by the ear; and he returned to earth with a howl of mock pain.

"You little tyrant!" he protested, wrapping one arm about her and hoisting her to his shoulder. "Your mother wasn't a patch to you."

She wriggled herself free and, still holding to the ear, led him into the shack.

"At least you can empty the water," she ordered.

"Oh, I can do more than that. How about the pans?"

"They're done."

He was really contrite. "I guess I did forget, little girl."

"It's a habit you have."

He rubbed his moustached lips along her bare arm and swung her again to his shoulder.

"Low bridge!"

She bent from her lofty perch until her cheek lay along his hair, and they passed into the kitchen, where he set her down with elaborate care.

"I guess that trestle isn't through with me yet," he observed, a frown marking his forehead. "It's dropped six inches in the last week." He picked up a pan of dirty water and started for the door.

"You won't be beaten," she told him confidently. "It's sinking less every day. You've put in half the country now—there must be bottom somewhere." He disappeared without a word and tossed the water over the edge of the chasm. "Anyway," she protested, as he returned, "looking at it isn't going to stiffen its backbone. If it is, you can do the pans and I'll do the looking. See those hands!" She held them outspread before his face. "Aren't you ashamed?"

He tried to look as she desired.

"They're the dandiest little hands in the world to me. They're your mother's over again. You don't need to care who sees them out here."

He saw the slight flush come to her cheeks, and his voice sobered.

"Adrian Conrad looks a pretty big fish where there's nobody but bohunks."

"Adrian's a 'big fish' anywhere," she flamed, "and you know it. Besides, there's the Police. Counting you that makes four real nice people. We've often been where there are fewer. The daughter of James Torrance, the big railway contractor—"

"Big Jim Torrance, you mean," he interrupted, throwing back his huge head to laugh. "The crudest boss that ever hammered a lazy bohunk to his pick. No, no, little girl, not all your airs, not all my big jobs, can make me more than a half-taught rough-neck—a success, I'll admit. But the biggest success he ever had was in having a daughter—"

He dived for her, but she held him off by planting the bottom of the pan on his face.

"Now," she ordered, "you finish your work."

By the time he had obeyed orders—emptied the last pan of water, taken a look at the two horses in the stable behind the shack, tossed his mud-caked boots through the back door to await his pleasure—interlarding between each chore another glance at the trestle—Tressa was in her own room.

Torrance returned to the front door. A crash of musical instruments broke from the ugly clutter of buildings on the river bottom.

"Do cut it short to-night, Tressa. Morani's got the orchestra going already. Where that Italian devil stows music in that vile body of his, and where he manages to find more of it in those other brutes, beats me."

He could hear her moving about her room, sliding drawers, lifting and dropping the implements of her evening toilet.

"Not another woman in a hundred miles," he grumbled, "at least not one that matters. And yet I got to go through this waiting every night!"

She laughed, her mouth full of the coil of her hair.

His eye moved upward from the camp and settled on one lone shack that crowned a promontory overlooking the ugly scene below.

"Koppy's at home," he called.

"Some day you'll find out something about your underforeman," she teased.

"I wish I could," he returned so viciously that she laughed aloud.

"You've been wishing it a long time, but to date he seems innocent enough. You don't need to care so long as he turns up to work every morning."

"Innocent?" He snorted. "Them damn Poles can't be innocent. Ever since them horses began to go— If we could only do without the damn heathen!"

"But you damn well can't."

"Tressa!" He stumbled back to her door with horrified eyes.

"My daddy's good enough to copy," she laughed.

"Your daddy, girl, is—is shocked. If I hear you—" He tossed his hands up helplessly. "You're making your daddy so mealy-mouthed, the first bohunk with a grouch will pull his nose. I've got to swear at 'em. If you don't let me tear loose a bit when I'm with you, the air's going to be so blue next time I meet a bohunk that he'll think he's gone to his last reward."

She came to the doorway of her room, coiling a loop of hair.

"Go and listen to the music, daddy. You need sweetening to-night."

The rough big fellow looked deep into her eyes. "I'd go plumb crazy in this life without you, little girl."

"Sure you would," she agreed contentedly. "Now run along and do Morani's orchestra justice. He deserves it."

He patted her cheek and returned to his favourite stand in the front door.

The evening mysteries were deepening. Already the trunks of the trees on the far bank of the river were merging into a dull mass. The play of sunlight and shadow in the nearer forest was an etching of white and black. The mellow sudden Western night was dropping glamorous mantle over the familiar scene, softening the crudeness of the camp and exalting the dying round of the forest's fight for solitude. The sand of the grade gleamed with evening tint of ochre. The network of the trestle was a maze of incised lines against the shaded bank opposite. A solitary bird, astir beyond its bedtime, hovered against the sky, cheeping to unseen brood below. Some swift-vanishing creature—wolf or coyote—ran along the edge of the distant bank for a fearful, curious glimpse of the persistent invasion of its venerable privacy. The sun, like a mocking challenge, was painting with flaming hand its tremendous but fleeting colour-picture on the northwest sky, where clouds unseen by day hung ever ready for the evening-hour brush of the great artist.

The dirty canvas of the camp was laundered by the mysteries of twilight. Living groups lay peacefully about the river bottom, gambling, Torrance knew. For the moment the orchestra was resting. But snatches of hideous sound came wafting on the evening air as music; concertina, fiddle, mouth-organ, with here and there a cornet, a mandolin, a guitar, many breathing individual melody, merged into one

vast harmony. Rasping voices lifted themselves in song. No laughter, no shouting—only the sounds of men whose memories are more sensitive than their feelings, who live in the past or the future, never in the present. Evening was fluttering gently down, mellowing line and tone.

Even to Big Jim Torrance at such an hour came the appeal of dimly reverent things. Here on the fringe of prairie and forest, in the vast spaces of Northern Canada where wolf met coyote, Torrance was waging a big fight. Last year he had brought the grade, a simple task, east of the mountains. Somewhere far down the list of sub-sub-contractors—fleas on larger fleas almost *ad infinitum*—he had built that gleaming line of yellow sand that held the sleepers and the rails—almost with his own hands. From far over the horizon to the east he had crept along westward, urging on his big gang with relentless but just hand. And out there before his door they had driven the last spike at the very edge of the valley that cut the landscape.

There was the end of his contract. Eastward the line awaited only the final ballasting. Westward—that was different.

The great river chasm that had ended his task was baffling O'Connor, the bridge contractor. For the irregular, winding gouge in the earth, reminder of the day when some tremendous torrent teemed there from the mountains hundreds of miles to the west, was more than a mere cutting to fill. Eleven hundred yards, one foot, four inches from bank to bank

(Torrance knew every measurement to the last inch), by one hundred and forty-one feet, eight inches deep, was task enough. Where the railway was to span the Tepee River, meandering in the midst of the valley, the water ran only seventy yards wide; nowhere in sight was it more than one hundred and fifty. And there was solid bottom to it.

But down there, one hundred and fifty feet below Torrance's eyes, was two hundred yards of quicksands. There lay the real job.

O'Connor had tackled it blithely enough, while Torrance was hustling grade from the east. But when Big Jim Torrance, his task completed, had rolled down his sleeves and commenced to pack, O'Connor was more than worried. Tressa had skipped about the packing with happy songs, for they were going East—to civilisation.

Then Torrance had gone to take a last look at O'Connor's progress, and O'Connor had turned haggard eyes on his friend and bent his head over his arms and wept. The quicksands were beating him.

Torrance fled back to the end-of-steel village at Mile 127, that ghastly face before him, the picture of a strong man weeping. And for three days he drank himself to forgetfulness.

On the morning of the fourth day he rolled up his sleeves again, waved his hand after the fleeing O'Connor, and signed a fresh contract for himself. Nature, the enemy he had been threshing into submission all his life, was not going to block the beautiful grade he had built. With the effects of the

acidulated poison of Mile 127 still in his limbs but clear of his brain he shook his fist at the quicksands.

And now, eleven months later, he was still shaking his fist—and his curses were deeper and more bitter. For the quicksands were fighting to the last ditch, swallowing whole forests of trees and hills of rock, and opening its maw for more. Friends urged Torrance to ask leave to move the grade north or south to sounder bottom. But Torrance was not built that way. Besides, he had great reverence for a survey. Even a bridge, where a filled-in trestle was planned—a bridge with a span two hundred yards long—impossible!

Torrance stood in the doorway and cast his eye along the line of steel above the trestle. Only a week ago it had been shored up again, and fewer supply trains than usual had passed. Yet it was down six inches.

The orchestra Chico Morani, a mere Dago bohunk himself, had organised among the men, burst afresh. And every other sound ceased. Even the gambling groups out before the camp paused to listen.

"Morani's started on the second number, Tressa. Thank Heaven he has one redeeming feature, if he is a Wop."

"This isn't your loving night, daddy. It must be my cooking—"

"There's Koppy just come out of his shack. A couple with him, Werner and Heppel, I bet."

"Dear me!" she teased out to him. "And I've been so careful with the meals." A few moments of

mirror concentration. "But I know what it really is—that trestle. It's nerves. . . . Till that hole's filled you're just an ordinary sick man. . . . And you know you can't stand the twilight. Come in and light up. . . . Adrian'll be here in a few minutes and read you back to peace. . . . And don't forget, daddy, we're almost out of books. You'll have to send for more by the next supply train. Constable Williams is to lend me his catalogues to make out a new list."

She stopped, conscious of a tense stillness from the room beyond. For a fleeting moment she listened, then hurried out, fastening the last pin in her belt.

Her father, feet braced, was staring tensely over the grade past the camp. And in his hand, half raised, was the rifle that always hung in a rack beside the door.

CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERIOUS RAFT

TRESSA TORRANCE, inured as sensitive girl could be to the turmoil and danger of their life on railway construction, experienced a new sensation of fear. Never had she seen her father use a firearm; his ready fists were more to his liking. With a breathless rush she stood by his side, one hand gripping the wrist of the hand that held the trigger guard.

That precaution first. Then she turned her eyes to where her father was staring.

Far up the ribbon of river, only a few hundred yards below where it emerged from its hidden course through the forest, a clumsy raft was drifting clumsily down. In the gleam of the last sun rays it was but a silhouette of black—a flat base with live creatures on it. In a moment it drifted from the glare and in the clear evening air was visible to the last line.

On it were a man and a woman, and a group of horses. Good cause for excitement there in the shack up by the grade. Along the mile of the Tepee that was known to man there was only one raft—at least only one that had a right to exist—the make-shift affair employed on construction duty down at the base of the trestle. Within sixty miles there was not a living soul but the construction gang and the two Policemen at Mile 127, not a horse but Torrance's

and the Police pair. At least that was the limit of Torrance's information, and none other had such claim to know.

But this was not the construction raft—and there were the horses. Torrance had already lost a dozen of his best in some mysterious way. It was with that thought that he had seized his rifle.

Then the woman!

Suddenly he became aware that something was wrong with the raft—and a few hundred yards ahead was a stretch of foaming rapids that would smash it to kindling wood. The woman stood leaning on the shaft of a broken sweep, watching the man. With unhurried but almost superhuman strength he was working the other sweep from the rear, aiming for the opposite bank.

The struggle seemed hopeless. Torrance read it at a glance, unaccustomed as he was to water. The tug of the rapids was drawing them swiftly downward in a course that was too slightly diagonal to its current to promise more than the faintest hope. The man seemed suddenly to grasp the extent of their peril, for his arms moved more quickly, the bow of the raft swinging about and pointing upstream; but still the current gripped them relentlessly.

The woman lifted her head and looked down along the whirling eddies to the froth of broken water. For a moment she stood, rigid, then turned to the horses, and from among them sprang a huge dog. Into its mouth she pressed the end of a rope, and it leaped far into the water.

Torrance's left hand fumbled back within the door for his field-glasses. Through them he saw the dog emerge lower down, still holding the rope, and dash in long bounds up the bank. As the strain of the rope came, it sank back on its haunches. The rope snapped up out of the water for a moment, and the dog plunged forward with the jerk, fighting every inch. Then it got a firmer hold and braced. Inch by inch the raft yielded to the extra power. It continued to drift toward the rapids, but also it was working to the bank now. At intervals the eddying current pulled the dog along, but always it braced against the tug, its feet digging into the loose gravel and sand.

The man was working hard, but so regularly that the dog felt but a fraction of the weight of the loaded raft. But what it felt was sufficient to turn the scales.

As the raft slithered in sideways to the bank, a small broncho dashed ashore, followed by four other horses. At a fast lope it led away toward the trees that grew down the distant slope to the river bottom.

Torrance awakened then. With livid face he swung the rifle up and fired. Tressa struck at his arm too late.

It was a long range, and to such an indifferent marksman a matter of luck. But to Tressa to try was sacrilege after the struggle they had witnessed. The bullet fell far short, glancing from the water in a swift slit in the reflecting surface.

At the report the broncho broke into a gallop. The man and the woman swung swiftly toward the grade,

and the next instant the woman had disappeared—somewhere; neither Torrance nor Tressa knew where. The man straightened and shaded his eyes toward them.

Tressa was struggling with her father. He must not shoot again. The man watched. Presently he slowly raised his rifle.

The thud of the bullet in the shack not two feet from Torrance's shoulder preceded the sound of the explosion. The rifle did not drop. A second tiny fleck of smoke, and a bullet sank into the logs only two feet on the other side of the doorway. Torrance heaved Tressa back within the shack. And as he came about, a third bullet from the mysterious stranger dug into the log not more than a foot above his head.

Torrance did not move—he scarcely even thought at that moment. The marksman above the rapids lowered his rifle and turned carelessly away. The woman and the dog joined him. The horses were lost in the trees.

The big contractor twisted himself from bullet hole to bullet hole, and one big hand pushed wonderingly through his heavy hair.

"It sure ain't me he wants," he muttered.

CHAPTER IV

IGNACE KOPPOWSKI APPEARS

THE rifle fire, disturbing to Torrance, created a panic in the camp below. Men who used weapons on each other with the worst intent were the first to appreciate their menace. True, they seldom resorted to firearms, for the Pole, and the Russian, and the Hungarian, and the Italian and their kind on construction consider the knife more suited to their particular case, as being safer and more satisfying. But for a gun they have a proper respect.

Some of the groups of gamblers on the river bottom saw the raft while yet Torrance was wrapped in the evening picture, watching at first with the stupidity of their class, then with equally characteristic suspicion. From group to group the strange spectacle passed without spoken word; and some whose spotted lives had carried them through varied scenes realised the threat of the rapids. Here and there one, more sensitive to the struggle, rose to his feet in unconscious sympathy. The stable foreman, recognising the horses, stumbled away to where his charges were housed for the night. But for the most part these slow-witted men without a quiver saw death creeping on the raft. Until the horses leaped ashore each knew to a cent his position in the interrupted games.

But the rifle shot whipping out from the boss's shack up beside the grade electrified them. As if worked by a common spring, they rushed for the camp, heavy footed and panicky, drawing hidden weapons from shirt or trousers or bootleg to repel the danger they did not understand.

By the time the stranger across the river had replied twice only one face was visible about the camp.

From a shack part way up the bank toward the trestle a small man had bounded at the first report. In his right hand was a hairbrush, and a pair of mauve suspenders hung from his hips. Anxious but angry, he searched the camp with those firm eyes.

Adrian Conrad, Torrance's foreman, Tressa's lover—the latter first in sequence of time as in everything else—knew these men and hated them with an intensity born of enforced association. Their unorthodox but definitive methods of settling the smallest dispute were familiar to him by experience. Indeed, on his small wiry frame were sundry scars of knives, whose customarily decisive operations he had thus far escaped by an arrogance of manner and a promptness of action that disconcerted a bohunk's aim and riddled his nerve.

About the camp he saw only the panic of getting to cover. As he wondered, he caught the movement of the lifting rifle across the river. Ahead of the bullet his eye reached the shack beside the trestle, and Torrance's quick turn pointed out its course. Conrad, who kept no rifle at his shack, had to be satisfied with watching, mechanically completing his toilet where he

stood. Mauve suspenders jerked to his shoulders—brush slashing across his hair—one hand to test the poise of his tie—Conrad was preparing for eventualities.

He marvelled at his own lack of concern. He could see Tressa's struggle with her father, and he suspected its cause. Also he had sufficient faith in her to feel that she was right. The stranger puzzled him. In the way he handled a rifle was the carelessness of complete confidence. Even before the third bullet directed Torrance's amazed eyes upward, Conrad knew that Tressa and her father were in no danger.

It was a fleeting glimpse of the horses disappearing among the trees that galvanised him into action. Running back into the shack, he satisfied himself with a hasty glance in the mirror, stuck a jaunty stiff hat askew on his head, and sped away up the path his feet had worn through the months straight to Tressa's door.

Torrance was still examining the bullet marks when Conrad dropped over the grade.

"There!" He placed a big finger tip importantly over one hole. "And there—and there!" He turned to Conrad with such a look of awe that the latter laughed.

"All you need care," Conrad said, digging a finger into Torrance's chest, "is that he didn't wish to put it there."

The contractor scratched his head.

"That fellow sure can shoot . . . but it ain't half as queer as the way he didn't want to."

Tressa, hearing Conrad's voice, tripped to the door, her eyes aglow with a shy eagerness.

"Evening, Tressa!" The foreman swept off his hat. "Fine evening for rifle practice."

"I know it don't matter about *me*," grunted Torrance, "but two feet at a range of twelve hundred yards is cutting it fine for Tressa."

But Conrad only smiled his unconcern.

"At least you might be interested in the horses," Torrance grumbled. "Another bunch gone. That's your business."

"So that's the cuss who's been robbing us."

"Such a clever lad, he is!" sneered Torrance. "You could see through a pail with the bottom kicked out of it. He'll keep on robbing us, for all you're doing to stop him. Right before our eyes he gets away with it. What do you think I pay you a hundred a month for?"

"Because you can't get any one else to do half the work half as well at twice the price," grinned the foreman.

Torrance growled into his moustache. "Four more gone, that is. And I bet you stopped to brush your hat."

"I didn't hurry. Why should I? That chap knew he was safe. He's miles away now, and by the time we could get across the river after him he'd be in the next Province. He knows the prairie better than we do grade. We'd have about as much chance of getting him as you had of hitting him. Besides, we're track builders, not track finders. Your measly hun-

dred a month don't half pay for my real job. Get the Police if you want to keep the excitement up."

"A hundred a month—and every evening in my shack," grumbled Torrance. "I know lots of better men would think it good pay."

"It's every evening in your shack," gibed Conrad, "or you'd have to come and live with Tressa and me."

"Oh?" questioned Tressa.

"Sure!" confidently.

"If you two are going to quarrel over me, I'll go back East."

"Dad-in-law," pleaded Conrad, "don't you think we could stage a good rough-and-tumble here and now? I've been two years trying to get her back East for good."

"I'm staying," declared Tressa, tossing her head.

"So'm I—in spite of your father."

"What gets me," marvelled Torrance, "is why he bothered to shoot when he didn't want to hit. A regular splash of them, too. I might have fired back."

Conrad's eyes were twinkling. "So you might. What a blessing is self-control! I suppose he's killed so many in his day it's sort of lost its glamour. See the admiring public he left behind by only frightening you to death."

"But the woman in the case!"

"What woman?" The foreman looked from one to the other.

"You didn't see her?"

"I confess I haven't the eye for skirts you have, but—" He broke off suddenly and darted to the grade. "Here!" he snapped, peering into the dark woods beyond. "Come out of it."

Three men emerged somewhat shame-facedly from the gloom and followed him to the shack. One of them, evidently the leader, was talking volubly, but Conrad did not even appear to listen until they stood in the open before the door.

"Now, what were you doing there?"

"Lefty Werner and Heppel and me, we hear shots," explained a large, raw-boned foreigner with an ugly scar along the side of his jaw. "We come quick. Fear boss and young missus maybe need help."

Koppy, the Polish underforeman, sent his eyes darting from face to face. In his manner was a curious mingling of bravado and diffidence—a lumbering body, a shrinking way of holding himself, a stammering foreign accent and phrasing. But in spite of it there was ample ground for Torrance's persistent suspicions. Perhaps it was the darting, all-seeing eyes, perhaps the exaggeration of diffidence, but Koppy gave the impression of thinking more than he said.

"When we need help—" Torrance began furiously.

Conrad cut in more quietly, but he was evidently holding himself in check. "And so you sneak up and listen—hide in the trees?"

"No sneak." Something stronger peeped through Koppy's veneer.

"We won't argue it. You know I know."

"I hear rifles," said Koppy, looking from foreman to boss. "I come quick." He was, in his subtle way, demanding an explanation.

"If you were half as keen over the knives and knuckle-dusters of them fellows of yours!" snapped Torrance.

"Rifles kill—far away. Knives—perhaps not—and only that far." He swung out a dexterous arm.

"Except when they throw the beastly things," growled Conrad beneath his breath, with twinges of memory.

"My men throw only when they can't reach," replied Koppy, as if Conrad had spoken aloud.

"Or when they're afraid to," added the foreman.

"Or when they're afraid to," agreed the under-foreman.

The hint of authority beyond his superiors nettled them both.

"I don't know what hold you have over that damned crew," Torrance stormed, "but if you'd make them watch the horses you'd be earning your money better than running up here."

"That damned crew steal no horses," Koppy objected with dignity. "I hold my men—yes," he went on proudly. "You pay me for that. I make them obey boss. Ignace Koppowski make them—"

"Yes, yes," Conrad broke in testily. "We know your full name. Drop the heroics."

"No heroics to think of young missus." Koppy turned to Tressa, forced to be an uncomfortable witness of one of the frequent quarrels that never

reached an issue. "If she say no danger, Ignace Koppowski satisfied." He bent his big frame with surprising grace.

Tressa smiled on the Pole from the upper step. She never could understand why her father and lover hated the fellow so. "Thank you, Koppy. Not a bit of danger—as it happened. It was good of you to be concerned."

The Pole repeated the obeisance. Conrad caught his eye as he lifted his head.

"And now," he ordered shortly, "you've learned all you're likely to. Get out."

A flash of anger came and went in the underforeman's face. He straightened, looking Conrad in the eye.

"Up here I take boss's orders. Boss want us to go—we go. But boss maybe need us some day. Perhaps we find who steal horses."

"I wish to hell you would," grunted Torrance. "It's worth fifty bucks in your hand if you do. Horses don't grow on spruce trees in this country."

"Horses don't. Boss lose no more—and Ignace Koppowski take no more pay."

With the flourish of the surprising promise he was swinging about to leave, when Conrad spoke.

"One moment, Koppy." His voice was very quiet, but his chin was thrust forward a little. "When Miss Torrance requires protection, there are those here can give it without your assistance. That's all."

A strange gleam they did not understand shot into the Pole's eyes. "Perhaps—not," he muttered, and

disappeared over the grade, his two silent followers at his heels.

Torrance scowled after them. "I'd be willing to lose every horse in the camp, if you'd go with them."

"I'll fire him to-morrow." The words chipped from Conrad's lips.

Torrance laughed. "Two years with them brutes hasn't taught you much, Adrian. Fire Koppy, and there wouldn't be a bohunk in camp the same night. . . . And their successors would be viler still, primed to vengeance by the bunch you'd kicked out. Ten years of it has taught me not to gamble with the unknown because I hate the known. Never really had so little trouble with a gang—at least, not till these last few weeks. . . . What d'ye think's got into them, Adrian? Somebody's sure at the bottom of all these things. That last bit of trestle didn't undermine itself, and them spikes didn't loosen just to dump the ballast train. What's the answer?"

"Sheer cussedness. What would you expect from such scum?"

As they passed inside, Torrance stooped to his foreman's face. "I hire a foreman to stop such things—or cow the brutes."

"I suggested firing Koppy to-morrow. That's the best way."

"Why Koppy?"

Conrad's eyes fell away sullenly. "He had the impertinence to imagine—" He stopped. "I could shoot him like a mad dog," he exploded.

Torrance chuckled. "That's the spirit, lad. I was

going to say that there's only one way to handle the bohunk: beat him down. . . . D'ye realise, Adrian, you haven't killed a single one yet? Sandy, who went before you, did for five in his last season—"

"And 'went before' me," smiled Conrad, "with five knives in his ribs. Thanks. I'm still alive—and I'm getting the work out of them. But this is a new one about Sandy. You told the Police, of course?"

"Sh-sh! I couldn't swear to it in a court of law. I'm not sure an unprejudiced jury wouldn't call it accidental death. The accidents happened to be convenient to Sandy and me. If a bohunk or two dropped out of the way now, d'ye think I'd try to fix it on you? I think too much of you, Adrian, my lad."

Tressa came round the table and pressed them into their favourite chairs. In Conrad's hand she thrust a lurid-backed novel. "And after all this blood and murder, let's get to the more peaceful pursuits of brigands and treasure-hunters. Sandy was a man after daddy's heart, Adrian—and at the last a few hundred bohunks were after Sandy's heart."

"Sandy never was a hero," said Conrad. "The hero never dies."

CHAPTER V

BLUE PETE, FRIEND AND LOVER

CLOSE to the waters of the Tepee River, now returned to its normal sluggishness with the rapidity of mountain-fed streams, a man sat on his heels in a clump of spruce. There, two miles above the construction camp, the canyon fell away more gradually to the old river bottom, and the trees, encouraged by a century of immunity from floods, crept ever downward until they pressed to the very edge of the channel that held the waters of the Tepee fifty weeks of the year.

It was evening. Clear as lines on a white sheet the woods on the other side stood out in the dustless air against the flaming sky. The wide band of water that intervened gleamed in the setting sun, scarce revealing the existence of a current. Save for the low chatter of nesting birds and the gentle gurgle of water beneath the bank there was not a sound. The wind was against the camp. For all the solitary man could hear he might have been the only human within the northland.

About him was a furtiveness of the wilds, not guilty but protective. In such surroundings he had been born, there he had spent most of his days. You could read it in the crouch, the quiet, unwasted movements, the unconscious attitudes.

His face told much of his story. Those bright,

darting eyes, crooked though they were, missed nothing; those sudden spaces of motionlessness, the peculiar, utterly still tilt of the head, were the natural impulses of one ever listening; the calm immobility of the dusky face was bred of a life of self-sufficiency, where muscle and eye were ever-active guardians. The coarse black hair that straggled from beneath a dirty Stetson, the high cheek bones, the swarthy complexion; these the outward signals of his half-breed origin. Yet from Stetson to high-heeled boots he was a cowboy, with the individual eccentricities in dress that scorned hairy chaps for leather, and walked with an arch of leg that craved the back of a horse to fill it.

The halfbreed was whittling, yet even in that simple recreation of the careless he bent to his surroundings. No crackling of hasty knife, no splashing about of shavings. Already one capacious pocket was filled with them, and those just made lay in a neat heap for hasty collection.

Often his hand held to listen, and always as he listened his eyes sought the shadows among the trees on the far shore. A scowl was twisting his face, of worry, not of anger; sometimes the knife bit into the soft stick with muscular response to his thoughts.

Presently he pushed the dirty Stetson back and ran a sleeve across his forehead, though it was not warm. Raising himself to his feet within the limited range of the clump of trees, he peered anxiously across the river, searching the opposite bank from the east to where it curved southward above the camp.

"Gor swizzle! Ef she don't come soon I gotta git over thar an' trail her. . . . An' that means givin' up the job . . . an' mebbe losin' out. Suthin' 's happened; she never took so long before. . . . But pshaw! what with Whiskers 'n' Juno—they'd take's good keer o' her as I cud myself."

He resumed his seat, but not the whittling, leaning against a tree with closed eyes. But he was not resting, for deep sighs broke from him, and his muscles were not loose.

Suddenly his eyes opened wide with a look of alarm, though not a muscle twitched. His quick ears had caught a sound among the trees at his back. On the instant he appraised the risk of the gleaming water before him, and then, like a part of the shadows, seemed to melt into the ground. The clump of spruce was there, and the shadows, just as they had been all these years, but not a shaving, not a mark.

Far out in the current the smooth gleam of the water was broken in moving eddies. Some round object was making its way toward the bank. In the cover of another cluster of trees further down the bank the halfbreed leaned out over the water and waved a warning hand. He dare not whistle or shout. But the round object, not forty yards out, turned sideways, revealing the head of a large dog.

At the same moment a rifle snapped from the thickets behind, and even as the halfbreed flattened out he noted the swift flash of spume close to the dog's head. Instantly the head dived. Instantly, too,

the second cluster of trees was empty, though there had been no sound, no perceptible movement.

Yards further down the stream the head reappeared, directed now to the far bank and moving more swiftly. A second shot from the thicket told of a watchful enemy.

Before the echo had returned from the opposite bank, a third shot, this time that of a revolver, split the evening silence. A stifled exclamation of alarm, and then the crashing of hasty flight up the slope.

The halfbreed thrust his gun in his belt and glided across the open to pick up a rifle with shattered stock.

"Don't know wot makes me so squeamish these days," he drawled, with a slow smile. "He sartin desarved it in the throat. That Pole 'n' me's goin' to butt agin each other some more. I never was wuth shucks when it comes to justice . . . an' I allus suffer fer it after. Look at Bilsy, an' Dutch Henry, an' a bunch more!"

He carried the broken rifle to the river's edge and whistled. The dog, now near the opposite shore, turned about. As it approached the clump that hid the halfbreed, ears came forward to assist eyes and nose, and a waggle of welcome told that all was well. With a shudder that sent a cloud of spray about, a great cross-bred Russian wolf-hound, with the head of a mastiff, clambered up the bank and bounded into the trees. The halfbreed threw his arms about the wet neck and hugged it in silent joy. His eyes were moist as he glanced sheepishly across to the other shore.

"Juno, ole woman, I sure love yuh to-night."

From about the dog's neck he untied a tiny water-proof bag and exposed a note, which he laboriously spelt out. Then, moving to the water's edge, he reached down and waved a hand twice back and forward.

Followed by the dog, he struck noiselessly upstream through the woods, and at last lowered himself over the gravel bank by means of overhanging boughs. Ankle-deep, screened by the foliage, he untied a raft of freshly cut logs, made a careful survey of the shore about him, and shoved out into the river, pointing slightly upstream. The dog established herself on the bow, her eyes on the shore they were approaching.

As he worked the sweep at the stern the man talked to the dog.

"Guess you 'n' Whiskers 'n' the missus has bin gallivantin', eh, Juno, ole woman? Sort o' leadin' the gay life all down them coupla hunderd miles to the Hills whar nobody lives. Trust the women! Yuh wudn't 'member thar was a feller back here chewin' his fingers off worryin' about yuh . . . an' workin' the shart offen his back an' gittin' thin fer the fambly, an' not even a horse to git about. . . . Nobody but a bunch o' roughnecks an' houn's—'poligisin' tuh yuh, Juno, fer callin' them critters houn's. They're c'yutes, that's wot they are. Ef thar was trees 'nough I'd len' my bes' rope to hang 'em . . . every dang one of 'em, 'cept Mister Conrad 'n' the boss."

Juno's only response was a periodic and perfunctory wagging of a limited tail, further limited by being sat on.

" 'Magine me, Blue Pete, bes' shot in the Badlands, an' Canada, too, fer that matter—least that's so, now Dutchy's gone, an' it was nip 'n' tuck between us—'magine me, cow-puncher from my born days, sometime rustler, sometime Mounted P'lice detective, sometime—oh, sometime pretty near everythin' with a horse in it, an' a rifle, an' a rope—'magine me workin' 'longside a gang o' Dagoes 'n' Poles that think a knife's fer stickin' people, an' a rifle fer the P'lice . . . me shovin' rocks 'n' logs into a hole in the groun' that won't fill this side everlastin'! . . . Kin yuh 'magine it, ole woman? An' them joshin' 'n' guyin' me, an' me swallerin' it like a tenderfoot! . . . An' never did fer one of 'em!"

The dog evidently considered it too preposterous for caudal comment; eyes and ears and nose were stretched toward the shore they were nearing.

"Yah, she's thar all right, eh, Juno? Yer eyes is better'n mine—but I bet I kin *feel* her thar. That's whar I git the bulge on yuh, ole woman." The half-breed chuckled, and leaned more powerfully to the sweep. "An' 'magine me shakin' chaps fer overalls, an' this ole Stetson fer a fi'-cent cap, an' these nifty ridin' boots fer things as big as this scow . . . an' takin' back-talk from a two-by-five Pole I cud break over one knee 'n' kick the pieces tuh Medicine Hat. . . . But it won't be fer long now, Juno. Jest two more little horses 'n' it's did . . . all did. . . . An' then mebbe we kin go back an' hold up our heads, Mira 'n' you 'n' Whiskers 'n' me. . . . Wonder wot Whiskers thinks o' me these days!"

He concentrated on the working of the sweep. Juno raised herself to give every inch of her stubby tail a chance. Blue Pete peered eagerly into the shadows along the shore.

"An' thar's yer missus, Juno," he cried joyfully. "Mira—our Mira!"

A few powerful movements of his arm swept the raft sideways against the bank. A woman, small and dainty, swarthy but without Indian blood, leaned eagerly forward—eager but shy. Waves of dark hair peeped from beneath her Stetson, and her green blouse blazed against the darker hue of the trees as she stood, one foot advanced, holding her arms toward the halfbreed.

Tossing the painter to the dog, Blue Pete leaped ashore and gathered her in his arms without a word. Then, tremulously happy but abashed by the fervour of their meeting, he released her and looked enquiringly about.

"I suppose it should have been Whiskers first," she pouted.

He laughed and whistled twice, and out from the trees trotted an ugly little pinto, all blotches of yellowish white and faded red, with a ragged tail that looked as if something had started to make a meal of it but became disgusted just before the end; and the left ear drooped humorously in its upper third. It nosed up against the halfbreed, nibbling playfully at his ears, his hands, the brim of his Stetson, the leather fringe of his chaps, the ends of the polka-dot handkerchief knotted about his neck.

"Yuh're some glad to see me, Whiskers, ole gal—if Mira ain't. But then yuh 'n' me knowed each other longer, an' sort o' got to see the good p'int's."

He laughed slyly at Mira from the corner of his eyes, and she laughed back, with a tinge of sadness in the tone, and turned away to take the painter from Juno. A second horse that had followed Whiskers from the trees stepped aboard the raft after the pinto.

"Bes' wait till it's darker," advised Blue Pete. "They got mighty peery since that las' raft showed us up. How d'yuh like the new one? 'Tain't's nifty 's the ole one, but it's easier handled, an' it'll last us through, I guess."

Mira was examining it soberly. "What's the matter with it? It don't seem even somehow."

He looked it over sheepishly. "I figured if I made it a bit shorter one side, yuh'd have less to pull. What bustin' I've did's run more to horses than boats, but ain't that about right? But the dang thing don't seem to work—like a loco'ed cayuse. Anyway it was a job. Them bohunks is getting' to roamin' about real annoyin', an' Koppy wust of all."

"Who was shooting just before you gave me the signal?"

"The bohunks, out after sparrow pie fer supper, I guess," he lied placidly, "ur larnin' which end a gun fires at. It's real dangerous in the bush these days. Fus' thing we know we'll have to show ourselves 'n' ask 'em to shoot at us to be safe. These loose bullets ain't a bit reasonable."

Mira let him ramble on; she loved to hear him,

loved it now more than ever, after her absence south with the last lot of stolen horses.

"Ain't it a bit small for horses, Pete?"

He eyed the raft doubtfully. "Thar's jes' two more, yuh know. It'll carry 'em, I guess. Anyway we kin make two trips of it." He paused and turned his gleaming eyes full on her face. "Jes' two more, Mira, an' then we kin clear out!"

"Where to, Pete?" She looked up at him in sudden fright then that she had spoken so plainly.

"Why—why—down south—to the 3-bar-Y—to suthin' wuth livin' fer—to whar yuh'll be a sight better off than with a rough cuss like me."

The wistfulness that had stilled her laugh and sobered her face these many weeks spoke at last; her eyes were wet.

"Have you thought, Pete, dear—thought what'll happen when they get us again?"

"Sure I have," he replied bravely. "Wot d'yuh mean?"

"What will the Police say?"

He reached out to tickle Whiskers' neck with a twig and laughed lightly. "I don' know wot they'll say, an' I don' care, but I know wot they'll *do*. They'll take hold o' my hands an'—an'—Gor-swizzle! I shud oughta know the Sergeant. . . . No more I ain't skeered o' th' Inspector."

"But we're still stealing horses, Pete."

"Yuh still want me to pay Torrance, the ole sinner, fer horses he knew was stole when he bought 'em?" He frowned. "If yuh say so when I got the money

myself, I'll give him the ten bucks a head he paid me fer 'em las' year . . . but I'm sure goin' to git them horses back fust the way they come, an' I'm not goin' to take any o' your money. Anyway he wudn't sell fer ten bucks."

"The Police never forgive," she sighed.

The halfbreed leaned thoughtfully against a tree, chewing the twig.

"I kind o' feel, Mira," he said presently, "th' Inspector's got feelin's some bigger'n that furrin sign he faces every day over his desk, 'maintins he drut,' * ur suthin' like that. He's a bully P'liceman, but he's a bully sight better friend, I'm gamblin'. Have any trouble this trip?"

She threw aside her melancholy. "The two corrals this side of the Red Deer are falling to pieces. Whiskers and Juno and I managed to keep them in at nights, but we couldn't do it again, I'm afraid. I used the old ford near the H-Lazy-Z; the water was too high to risk the other. Of course I crossed at night. Met a farmer just over the railway, but it was too dark to mean anything. Bert is having an easy time with the bunch in the Hills, but we moved them further east. He's saw the Police poking about the Hills a lot, specially Sergeant Mahon. . . . I'll be glad when it's over, Pete. Things has gone too easy for a long time. Something always turns up to spoil things."

"Didn't the raft 'most get away on us in the rapids? Ain't that 'nough to happen?"

* "Maintiens le droit," the motto of the Mounted Police.

"I wasn't scared a bit," she said. "I knew you'd get us through."

"Swizzled if I did," he laughed. "I was skeered stiff."

"Well, you fooled me," patting his cheek with loving incredulity.

"An' all the time my knees fair tremblin'—wuss'n when Dutchy had the drop on me an' me without a gun. Juno, ole woman, yuh done us fine that time. . . . Only two more to git, Mira, an' then we're free. I don' say them two ain't goin' to take some gittin'; they're in the boss's own stable, an' he has ears like a gopher. He 'n' the young missus ride 'em—ur they think they do."

He handed her aboard the raft and took his place at the stern.

"Lie down, Whiskers; yer legs is too teetery fer this craft. Yuh might take a day off 'n' larn that fool jinny o' Mira's to lie down when she's told to. No, Mira, I'll git it across myself. It's down stream, an' I wantuh show yuh she ain't so bad a boat fer a cow-puncher to make with wooden trees outen a wooden head. I got all my ole muscles back . . . workin' fer Torrance, dang hard work, too, to say nothin' o' them dirty Poles and other cats. . . . I gotta turn up to the minute every mornin' ur they wanta know why. That nigger, Koppy! Some day I'll jes' natcherl bust up an' take him to Heaven with me. I'm sure losin' my spunk."

CHAPTER VI

THE HIDDEN MARKSMAN

ADRIAN CONRAD withdrew his feet from the table and consulted his watch. Benny, his cook, a large fair-haired Norwegian, pushed through from the kitchen with an armful of dishes and gravely arranged them on the oilcloth-covered table in preparation for tomorrow's breakfast. Then, with a cough—his nightly farewell—he disappeared.

Conrad, still examining his watch, heard him depart by the back door, drawing it carefully behind him, and tramp in his heavy dragging way round the shack to the path leading down to the camp. Alone, the foreman rose and pulled out a drawer, frowning critically into it.

The task of selecting his evening tie was interrupted by a subdued grunt from the doorway. The ruddy face of Benny, the silent, was poking through, alive with excitement.

At the same instant Conrad became aware of the source of the Norwegian's agitation. From the camp below broke the distant clamour of altercation, the full-mouthed curses of excited foreigners building up a structure of more strenuous argument. In four strides the foreman was at the door.

Conrad's shack was strategically situated. Half-way up the sloping path between camp and trestle,

it overlooked the former unobtrusively. From his door he had his men under his eye, with all the advantages of a not too distant isolation.

The scene of the commotion was apparent enough, a small excited group of men, probably the participants in one of the games of chance always in progress in the evenings in the open space between the camp and the water. Far more industriously the bohunk gambled his pay away in the evening than he earned it by day. And always overhung the contractors this peril of a camp quarrel.

Almost before Conrad had seized the spirit of the incident, it was swelled by the accession of other disputants. Five seconds' thoughtful scrutiny warned him that to attempt to quell it without assistance was taking an unjustifiable risk. Small groups were rising angrily everywhere about the river bottom, and crowding to the fringes of the altercation. Alone, he might fail, and it were better then not to have tried. By the time he could reach the scene half the camp would probably be involved.

For he saw at a glance that this was no personal squabble but one of the infrequent but always impending race feuds.

He jerked his head about to see if Torrance knew. But the shack door up at the trestle was empty; Torrance and Tressa would be in the kitchen cleaning up. Thereupon Conrad set off at a run up the sloping path, watching intermittently the angry scene below.

A hundred yards from the grade he put his fingers to his lips and whistled. Torrance came instantly to

the door. He saw the fight, saw Conrad's beckoning hand, and, without hat or coat, dashed out to the grade. But even as he leaped the rails his mood altered: pulling up, he strolled leisurely on down the path.

Conrad was intent on the waxing conflict. Group by group it was extending. He realised the wisdom of the instinct that had sent him for help—if the affray had not already passed control. There were only the two of them to count on. Koppy, whose duty it was to forestall such conflicts, was nowhere in sight; and anyway Conrad had learned not to trust the Pole. Casting hasty eyes upward toward the underforeman's shack topping the promontory overlooking the camp, he fancied a dim movement in the darkness of the interior. Unless his eyes deceived him, Koppy was out of the reckoning in case of need. Irritated, Conrad swung about impatiently. Torrance was sauntering downward, filling his pipe.

"Here," the foreman called sharply, "we must stop that, and quick."

"It's only a fight," drawled Torrance.

Conrad's face darkened with disgust. "Don't cut your own throat. You don't seem to have heard of where these fights sometimes lead—Swanson's, for instance, and Tillman's, to mention only last year's. You'd be in a fine mess with one of those on your hands in late July, wouldn't you?"

"Let it go for a couple of minutes longer, Adrian," pleaded Torrance. "They're just getting into it. I see a knife out."

"And that's what we must forestall. Or it'll end only when the Italians and the Hungarians have cleaned out the Swedes and the Poles, or vice versa. There's not a second to waste."

He had hold of Torrance's arm and was forcing him to run.

"I know you're right, Adrian," panted Torrance, "but I don't want to."

As they neared the camp, running now at top speed, Conrad saw Koppy emerge fussily from his shack above the camp and come leaping down—too late, of course, to be of much service.

The fight had grown to alarming proportions. Originating in a mere normal act of cheating at cards, naturally resented by a huge Swede who had been losing steadily to a one-eyed Italian, it had passed swiftly into the realms of the smouldering feud between the races. And the first blow had excited the onlookers to take vociferous sides; the first weapon had roused their lingering instincts of antagonism; and the first drop of blood had driven a dozen of them headlong into the *mêlée*. Before Conrad and Torrance arrived, knives and knife-ended knuckle-dusters and clubs were swinging.

The most disgusting feature of the shrieking, struggling mass was the presence on its outskirts of sneaking villains intent only on their personal enemies.

One of these had just plunged his knife into an unsuspecting arm when Torrance caught sight of him. It fired his blood to a blind fury. With a lunge he planted his heavy boot on the brute's forehead, and

the fellow crumpled up and lay record to an honest man's anger. Thereafter Torrance knew only that he was enjoying himself, as fist and boot struck snarling face or struggling body. Followed a few minutes of more careful fighting, as the roused bohunks began to retaliate; and then a sense of personal danger not to be countered by any amount of exertion.

As he threw himself into the fight he glowed with the satisfaction of knowing that every face before him belonged to an enemy. Normally slinking cowards before authority, the bohunks were now inflamed beyond anything but brute force. Curses too deep and furious to express more than their tone—the cries of the wounded—the panting of laboured breathing—Torrance roared into it, striking right and left.

At the last moment Conrad turned aside. He had an idea that the impression on the warring elements would be increased by separate attacks. From another angle, therefore, silently and recklessly he fought his way into the mob. He had no thought of defence—merely slugged, trusting to the surprise and speed of his attack to protect him.

Five convulsed faces had fallen before the fury of Torrance's assault before there was resistance. The first threatening arm he seized in relentless clutch, flinging back over his head the knife it held. Then a Hungarian, saved from a swinging club by Torrance's quick blow, recognised only another foe and lunged with a knife. The contractor kicked him out of the fray and went on.

In the meantime Conrad was realising his mistake in dividing forces. The mob was quieting a little, it was true, but it was the comparative calm only of discovering new foes. Torrance, ten yards away, was battling like a madman, but now advance was hopelessly blocked by weight of numbers and concentrated resistance. Two dozen bohunks, lost now to any ordinary sense of peril, were bent on paying off old scores. Conrad began seriously to fight his way over to Torrance.

Across the crowd he could see Koppy making headway at last, and he vaguely wondered why. A face loomed before him, and he struck into it viciously. It dropped away, but a shooting pain across his scalp warned him that he was cut; a moving spot of warm moisture on the back of his neck located a small stream of blood.

The maddest fury of the fight seemed to have waned, yet Conrad knew that the danger to him and Torrance had increased. Italian and Hungarian, Pole and Swede, had forgotten their race feud in the greater hatred of their bosses. The noise, so hideous and snarling when they arrived, was stilled in unity of purpose.

Many had retired, some to nurse their wounds, others not yet blind enough to custom to ignore authority. Those who remained knew what they were doing. Murder was in their eyes.

Through a temporary opening in his own group Conrad caught Torrance's eye, anxious and a little uncertain. The foreman made a peremptory move-

ment of his head urging retreat—for Torrance. If one of them could get away for a rifle! At that instant he ducked to avoid a side attack, and Torrance saw the blood on his neck. With a bellow the contractor charged through.

"Back to back!" he shouted, and lashed out sideways with one foot at a fresh onset against the tiring foreman. Conrad smiled. He was feeling the strain—had been for minutes—but Torrance's arrival lent him fresh strength. Back to back they continued the losing struggle.

A gleam of light darted on Conrad's right, and he knew he could not avoid it. But suddenly the knife dropped, and the one who had wielded it grabbed his wrist with the other hand. The foreman dare not look to see what had happened, but he was aware of a sudden thinning in the crowd of spectators.

A lumbering Pole, his club knocked away by an unexpected blow from Torrance, leaped furiously on the contractor. The latter turned his back to receive the shock, at the same time ducking forward. The Pole's legs shot into the air before Conrad's eyes—a shriek—and a sudden stain of blood on the pant leg. Yet no one had touched the place where the blood gushed.

The scene was changing curiously. A score of men still fought to reach their prey, blind and deaf to everything but their own passions; but the great crowd that had made the threat of disaster so ominous had disappeared. One of the mad group about them, teeth bared, was creeping closer to Torrance, a long stiletto

held aloft. But as it jerked back to strike, the hand that held it opened nervelessly, and a spurt of blood covered the fingers.

Many pairs of eyes had been on that stiletto, and when it dropped, bloody and useless, a sudden silence fell. In the midst of it a rifle snapped from the trees behind the camp. An Italian, into whose bloodshot eyes a sudden sense of fear was crowding, grabbed his ear and howled. A thin stream of blood trickled down his wrist.

Not another blow was struck. It was not the casualties, not alone the sound of the rifle, but rather the uncanny mystery of the hidden marksman and his aim. Almost before the two hard-pressed men dare look about them, the river bottom was empty of life, save for themselves and Koppy, and two or three delayed by the nature of their wounds.

"Right again, Adrian," puffed Torrance, picking at the torn sleeve of his shirt and feeling himself over gingerly. "I thought they'd got you when I saw that scratch. Here, let's look at it."

But even as he reached to Conrad's shoulder his interest faded before the marvel of their succour, and he turned to run his eye in a puzzled way along the thin trees of the slope behind the camp.

"By hickory! The horse-thief again! There ain't two can shoot like that." He noticed Koppy staring angrily in the same direction. "It sure ain't one of your gang, Koppy. That would be one too many."

"No bohunk—no bohunk!" assented the Pole, and there was that in his voice boded ill for proof to the

contrary. "No bohunk . . . maybe. . . . I don't think."

Tressa came running round the nearest shack, rifle in one hand and a small automatic in the other. She saw the blood on Adrian's collar and made straight for him. For a moment her father frowned jealously.

"A man brings a daughter into the world," he sulked, "frets and stews and labours over her until she's old enough—to fall in love with some young fellow who never had a moment's worry about her."

"And so it has been since ribs ceased to become women," grinned Conrad. "It's only another beauty mark, Tressa. It's stopped bleeding already." He turned angrily on Koppy. "You saw this fight from the first—"

"I come as soon as I see," protested the Pole indignantly.

"You lie! You wanted to see it get beyond us. You thought they'd do for us, didn't you?"

"Why do I fight, then?" enquired Koppy, with lifted eyebrows.

"Heaven only knows," muttered Conrad. "But you saw we had 'em licked."

"Don't be an ass," chided Torrance, his eyes still on the trees. "We can lick four hundred and ninety-five of them, but it was that fellow in there did for the extra five. Find him for me, Koppy, and I'll put him in your place and kick you to hell."

"If Koppy find him, you no need," replied the Pole, the expression of his face clearing away the ambiguity of his words. "I find him."

As if in challenge, the unseen rifle replied. Koppy leaped aside, stooping to examine a long slit in the side of his high boots.

"I find him," he hissed, shaking his fist at the trees.

Torrance chuckled delightedly. "A dandy eye for beauty, that chap has. He seems to like us; I'd hate to have him shooting the boots off me like that."

He started for home, but bethought himself.

"Get the wounded rounded up, Koppy. Nobody dead. Just as well. Funerals are a nuisance. Can't see why a bohunk can't sneak off into the bush and die without any bother. If there's more than one speeder load to lug that seventy-five miles to the hospital, there'll be the devil to pay. You and the cooks have your hands full bandaging the rest of the evening, I guess. Come up in an hour and report."

As they toiled up the slope to the trestle Torrance broke a long silence.

"In your prayers to-night, Tressa, you might put in a word for a mysterious stranger with an eye like an eagle. I think we're going to need him a lot before this job's finished."

CHAPTER VII

CONRAD FLASHES A GUN

A WHISTLE sounded down the line, a short nervous blast twice repeated. An instant shrieking of hand-brakes, and the rumbling train of loaded flat-cars slowed down toward the trestle.

Torrance lumbered up from the supper table to watch. He was hoping that by some slip of the levers up in Murphy's cab the rock-laden cars would glide out over the trestle and give it a real test. The trains that crossed carrying supplies to construction further west were comparatively light, because of just such tender spots on the line; and they never stopped until they reached the other side. And always they sent back the taunting whistle of engineers breathing again after the perils of the "softest" place on the line.

Murphy, the engineer of his ballast train, persistently refused to expose one little car to "the crazy conthraction ye have the nerve to call a threstle. Sure I'd as lave tie down me gauge and sit on the biler as put a foot on that skinny doodle." And Murphy never made a mistake with his levers.

As Torrance watched, the end car slowly glided back toward the trestle and, to the sharply extended arms of an overalled brakesman, came to a standstill with

a few inches of the truck overhanging the gossamer structure.

Far up the track the engine puffed and panted. Presently a bewhiskered little old Irishman climbed from it and came ploughing down beside the grade.

"Late to-night, Murphy," said Torrance severely. "What's the row?"

"Row, d'ye ask? Listen to that now," he demanded of the grinning brakesman. "Huh!" He bent to examine his sand-filled boots. "I'll be later still some o' these nights, that I will, ye big bully, if ye don't take the throuble to lay a footpath down that gr-grade for dacent citizens to use. Me legs are only that long, and I wasn't born on the seashore. Some day I'll stay up with me cab, I will, and then who'll brighten up yeer dull and unintheresting lives? How'd ye kape in touch with civilisation then, I'd ask ye?"

As the extent of Murphy's connection with civilisation was never more than fifteen miles down the line, Torrance and Tressa could laugh without offending his choleric feelings.

Murphy became aware of the few inches of flat-car that overhung the trestle.

"Ye mooney-face!" he roared at the brakesman who, his day's work done, was lolling on the grass. "Don't ye know that straw-pile's apt to blow over if ye disturb the air about it. Ye just saved yeer skin by about four inches. If ye'd let me run out on that boy I'd have t'rown ye over it, that I would."

The brakesman continued to grin.

"Ye can slit yeer face all up and think ye're laughing, ye can, but be the time ye'd struck a few t'ousand o' these bean-poles and clothes-line props that Torrance here calls a threstle, ye'd be looking like a pin-cushion dress-making day. It's dangerous, I call it, to lave splinters like thim with their ends up. Some day a thoughtless brakesman like yeerself will take a careless breath in the vicinity—and there ain't an undertaker this side o' Saskatoon."

Torrance, half nettled, laughed carelessly.

"If you'd sharpen up your wits more, Murphy, hustling along here in reasonable hours, instead of insulting a work you're not big enough to understand, you'd get away sooner to a softer job."

"Softer, is it? Sure I nade something softer soon or I'll get as tough as a railway contractor. I suppose ye'd call it a soft job running a train where a herd of—no, ye didn't hear what I called them, Miss Tressa—where a filthy, low-down gang of craters dressed up like men and walking on their hind legs, is running loose. Lifted about four miles of rail, they did. This locomotive engineer's been doing railway building for half a day; and if ye could do my job as well as I can do yours, Torrance, there'd be no nade o' the two of us. If I had a rowdy, dyed-in-the-wool mob like them under me I'd shoot the lot and have a better stand in with St. Peter than I'm going to have as an engineer. I'd die happy if I could catch one of thim in the act and he wasn't too big for the fire-door."

Torrance looked grave. "Another? That's the second this week. If this—"

"Indade, it was another. Ye didn't think it was the same rail I've been putting down every day for six years or so. When I fix a rail it stays, it does."

"Leave the train there till morning," urged Torrance; "we'll unload it first thing."

"Lave thim, is it?" shouted Murphy. "Lave thim on the main line! Not likely! When I lave this man-trap, they go too."

"Murphy, you're a bad-tempered little stickler to rules that don't mean a cuss. There isn't another train within a hundred miles or so, except west; there won't be one this way for days."

"I didn't know ye'd done so well as a bridge builder they'd made ye train-despatcher too," sneered Murphy. "Build a siding and I'll take a chance, though it ain't fair to Molly. Ye'll nade one anyway. Trains ought to have a chance to pull up where it's safe and say their prayers before tempting Providence on those straws. Why don't ye set up a saloon where the passengers can get drunk first—"

"Look here, man, the whole camp's at supper. They wouldn't work an extra hour for the devil."

"Why don't ye let somebody else ask thim thin? Of course if they've got ye scared—"

Torrance knew the danger of demanding overtime even when necessitated by their own devilish destruction. He knew the added risk since the recent camp fight. But the suggestion of danger threw precaution to the winds. Taking a nickel whistle from his pocket he stepped on the trestle and blew a long blast.

The camp lay quiet and clear in the late afternoon

sun, a long line of sluggish smoke marking the cook-houses. A few minutes more and the lazy evening life would filter out over the river bottom. At the moment five hundred mouths were working as if their lives depended on it, five hundred pairs of eyes were looking for the next plate to devour.

First to appear in answer to the summons was Adrian Conrad, the one to whom it was directed. He took in the situation at a glance, even without Torrance's pointing arm, and made straightway for the cook-houses. From the open door of one of them Koppy's head appeared, and disappeared as quickly. He, too, understood.

As Conrad approached the nearest cook-house, Koppy emerged hastily on his way to the next. Conrad changed his intentions and strolled on after the underforeman. The two men met face to face as Koppy was coming out. The foreman, inches shorter, laid a hand on the Pole's shoulder. "I want you back here, Koppy." Without excitement, without apparent annoyance, he thrust the Pole ahead into the building.

A hundred and fifty evil countenances glared at them from about the long tables, some openly defiant, some only uncomfortable; all sullen and prepared to resist under the influence of what Koppy had just hurled at them in impassioned words.

"I'm afraid you've made it hard for yourself, Koppy," said the foreman. "How long will it take them to finish?"

"Supper is *their* time," returned the underforeman stiffly. He was temporising; he scarcely knew how

far it was wise to resist. "After supper?" He shrugged his shoulders in simulated indifference.

Conrad ran undisturbed eye over the tables, noting the pie before each diner.

"After supper is *my* time to-night," he corrected quietly. "In ten minutes they're wanted on the grade. There's a train to unload."

A rumble of protest cut him short. Koppy, the firm lines of the foreman's face close to his shoulder, hesitated.

"Why for train not here in time?" he demanded. "We work ten hours. Train don't come. Why?"

Conrad lifted his shoulders and let them drop. "Ask the boss that—after. Now—the train has to be unloaded!"

The underforeman still hesitated. He had a curious respect for this quiet little fellow who never argued, never swore, never retreated from a stand once taken; and he was not quite certain how far he could trust his men in open conflict with authority. But they were waiting for his lead; his future with them was at stake.

"Perhaps they not work. Perhaps they say they work enough to-day." He caught the hardening gleam in Conrad's eye. "Can I make them?"

"If you can't," said Conrad, "I can. Only there'll be sore heads, and an empty bunk or two before I'm through. And yours will be one of them. I've given the orders; are you going to make them obey or am I—in your absence?"

A few of the men were on their feet now, mumbling,

waving their soiled fists. Certain mysterious movements were significant to Conrad. Like a flash he had Koppy round the waist and was pressing a small automatic into his stomach.

"I want them to sit down, Koppy," ordered the foreman, "every one of them. You have till I count five. If I see a knife in the meantime, time's up. One—two—"

The Pole swallowed—shouted something in a foreign tongue, and every hand fell into the open, weaponless, every man sat down.

"You're a wise guy sometimes, Koppy," smiled Conrad. "Now you and I remain here for five minutes, then fifty of them come with us—I won't need more. Tell them that in the lingo. I'm already holding the watch. . . . And, Koppy, hereafter you'll save yourself embarrassment by remembering I'm foreman; these men take orders from me—through you. I don't make a habit of showing a gun, but I prefer it to argument with you. . . . All ready, march. You and I'll go last, Koppy."

But outside, Adrian Conrad passed carelessly along the line of sullen men and led up the bank and through the woods to the standing train. And not a knife showed.

Torrance and Murphy and the train crew watched the line file from the cook-house and up the path.

"'Blimey!' as me friend, 'Uggins, o' Whitechapel, would say," exclaimed Murphy. "And then some!"

Torrance only rubbed his hands.

"Did I bring enough?" enquired Conrad.

"They'll do."

"So'll ye, me lad," said Murphy behind his hand to Tressa. "Faith, but ye've a way wid ye. Here I was hoping for a bang-up spree, wid me houlding the watch till me blood got riled; and all that rat of a kid does is to dr-rop a few hundred husky bohunks into his pocket and lug 'em up the bank to overtime on a foine night like this. It's dishear-rtening. A chap can't get up a recent foight out here. I'm going back to civilisation where they still bang each other about a bit in a friendly way, thank God! Where'd yeer father pick him up, Tressa?"

"He didn't 'pick him up'," replied Tressa indignantly.

The merry eyes of the engineer came round to her in a slow circle.

"I'm always making mistakes like that. I never can tell when a couple's married—not unless he's showing the mar-rks of it about the pate, or flir-rting wid another gir-rl. What I meant to ask was how did yeer benevolent paterfamilias contrive to induce him to direct his seductive manners to the uncongenial atmosphere o' construction." He peered more closely into the laughing eyes of the girl. "And good taste he has, too, bad cess to him! If I was younger now— These whiskers hide me age; they've always been me fatal lure. The girls take to thim like ants to sugar. Me first wife took to thim so liberally I had to cut thim off in self-protection. I used to wear thim par-rted in the middle. Ah, a gay dog was I. That was before I saw 'Lord Dundreary.' Sure I changed thim

so quick then the gir-rls didn't know they weren't flirting wid the same fellow. Next to being taken for an Englishman, an Irishman would prefer old Nick himself. So I let thim grow solid, the luxuriant and becoming gr-growth ye're admiring this very minute. . . . Look at that now!"

He indicated the work of unloading. Each car was being emptied at the edge of the trestle on the other side of the grade, where a long shoot had been scooped from the bank and walled off to direct the falling rocks from the framework of the trestle.

"Ye'd think some o' thim beggars liked wor-rk. Koppy, there, him o' the leering eye and forked tongue—that's Indian, ye know—he thinks he's showing off."

Koppowski was standing on a car, legs far apart, heaving over great rocks with his bare hands. Two bohunks, unsuccessfully tussling with a huge piece, he unceremoniously pushed aside, to grip it with his callous hands. Slowly it tilted, balanced a moment, and bounded away to the valley with great thuds.

"Ye mayn't be aware of it, gir-rl, but ye're expected to clap. Koppy's showing off. I know the symptoms—but I grew whiskers then." He combed long, toil-stained fingers through the beard.

Car after car the train moved back, the empty ones passing out over the trestle, which Murphy pretended to study with anxiety. The engine panted up to the end of its task.

"Well, there's Molly." The firemen thrust tousled head from the engineer's side of the cab to catch the signals. "Billy 'Uggins may be only an Englishman

from Whitechapel, or wherever they raise the lowest brand, but he and Molly are getting too friendly. If I weren't frightened o' that crazy contrhaption o' yer father's I wouldn't let him touch a lever; but till that beanpole toy is safe for a cat I'm not going to risk the head end of any train. And here's for supper, and a long sleep!"

He sprang into the cab with a roar at 'Uggins, tossed a kiss to Tressa, pulled the whistle cord, and drew away with increasing speed from the trestle and down the line to the official siding, three miles away, at the deserted end-of-steel village.

The work was completed for the night, yet the men lingered, self-consciously kicking over fragments of rock. Torrance and Conrad, without seeming to notice, were aware that something was in brew; and, wishing to meet it in the open, they did not enter the shack.

Presently Koppy and one of his bosom friends, Carl Heppel, detached themselves from the loitering group and approached the boss.

"What you pay overtime, my men ask?"

"Overtime!" Torrance's roar rolled out over the valley. "What in h— d'ye mean? When I want men they got to work. I don't care what hour it is—" The depth of his fury choked him. "Get your damned bunch out of my sight, and quick, or I'll kick you to perdition. They tore up the rail that forced the overtime—"

Conrad had come to his side; he spoke quietly now:

"These men may be innocent. They've worked be-

yond the ten hours. Time-and-a-quarter would be fair."

Torrance gaped; the world seemed to be falling from beneath his feet.

"I would add this proviso," continued the calm voice of the foreman, "that when damage occurs again, the extra work it entails will not be paid for. You may take that as a warning, Koppy. Tell them"—his eyes were flashing, though his voice had not risen—"that extra work caused by damage to the line will always be done overtime—and—they're going—to do it—without pay. Understand? Now clear out."

CHAPTER VIII

A TRAGEDY OF CONSTRUCTION

STRETCHED on the dry grass beside the trestle, hanging perilously over the edge of the dizzy drop to the river bottom, Tressa watched the unceasing struggle with the hungry quicksands.

A hive of industry was below her—men and horses, huge tree trunks and masses of rock, network trestle and piled poles. Men swarmed everywhere, appearing from her height mere dots of movement, ridiculously unfit to cope with the force that was making her father so irritable these days.

Two distinct gangs were at work. Over beyond the water the filling in of the trestle was almost complete, the material being hauled by a train working from cuttings to the west. A great hundred-and-fifty foot bank of loose earth had swallowed the "crazy contraption" to the very edge of the water, sloping steeply upward at its near side from the bridge that spanned the permanent course of the river. Everything hung now waiting only for the choking of the quicksand to commence the filling of the near side.

From bank to bank of the river a heavy boom of logs caught the trees felled in the forest above and floated down for the great maw that had already swallowed so much. These trees, trimmed of all but their larger branches, were being drawn to the shore by the

surer footed men and several teams of horses; the river bottom down there was a tangle of trunks ready to feed to the quicksands.

Closer in beneath the bank over which she looked men were piling rocks on the spongy area, as they had been for weeks—as they were a year ago under O'Connor—as they might be forever, unless luck favoured her father.

To the inexperienced eye the scene was ceaseless activity, but Tressa had long since learned the skill with which the bohunk conceals his laziness. A dozen civilised workmen would accomplish as much as three times their number of foreigners. But this was a bohunk's job; civilised workmen treated it as a plague.

The swift figure of Adrian Conrad moved from group to group, leaving a wake of energy. By sheer personality and grit he gained his ends, though railway construction was as foreign to his life's plans, past and future, as suicide.

She smiled as she thought of the reason of his presence, and blew a kiss over the edge to his unsuspecting head. This, the great task of her father's career, would mark the end of Conrad's apprenticeship. These days of a mass attack on the bottomless pit might be the beginning of the end. When the mass of logs and trees and rocks was dumped in, surely she could lay her plans for a new life! Conrad would return to the city, to the partnership he had dropped only temporarily to be near her; and her father would have enough for the rest of his days.

A week or two to test the success of their latest

effort, another to build the permanent foundations and strengthen the trestle in its final shape, and then a few weeks at most for the fill-in. Already the wave in the trestle beneath the supply trains was scarcely noticeable. The end was in sight.

Her father she could pick out easily enough—that still, large figure standing by itself, or joined now and then by Adrian. Once it jerked forward, and half a dozen men catapulted themselves at some part of the work that did not please him.

Presently Adrian and two others gathered before the contractor, where they seemed to confer a long time. One, Tressa knew, would be Koppowski; the other must be one of his friends, Werner probably, or Morani, or Heppel. They alone of the five hundred possessed intelligence enough to justify consultation. The rest merely obeyed orders, like the horses, and crammed their stomachs till the dishes were empty. Yes, and made strange music of evenings. She never understood that.

Then Adrian and her father were alone.

The men swarming through the lower lacework of the trestle were keying up with sledge and rope and wrench, adding a pole here and there. These they lifted by means of rope and pulley attached to convenient parts of the existing structure. Her father was pointing upward. A bohunk climbed clumsily to the point indicated and tied a pulley there. Passing a rope through the pulley, he tossed the end down. Several men seized it. To the other end a log was attached.

Down below, Torrance watched the carrying out of his orders with keenest interest. He had been at this for months, and his trained eye could pick out the weak spots with unerring instinct. To his eye he was forced to trust for the support of those twin bands of steel high above his head, since the uncertain and uneven sinking of the trestle, green timber, and ignorant and careless workmen, with the incidence of accident far above the average, made construction at the best patchy and haphazard.

He was surprised and a little chagrined by the weakness he had discovered; he could not understand how it had escaped him before. The pull, the brace of the trestle poles just there did not seem unsound, yet instinct warned him that something was amiss in the sag of adjacent supports. His orders to Conrad, accordingly, were hurried and abrupt.

The men in the trestle went about the work in their usual clumsy way, but at last a score of men had hold of the rope and the fresh log rose on its end in slow jerks. Then it was clear of the ground, rolling in a leisurely way against the lower supports of the trestle in response to the uncurling of the rope. Up above, men were holding it away from the trestle; a dozen more waiting to fasten it in place.

It had risen twenty feet when a cry of warning burst from Torrance's lips. He scarcely knew why. His wandering eyes had fancied a sag in the support that held the pulley; his quick ear had caught a new note in the creaking timbers.

From above came the sound of snapping ropes—a

chorus of panic-stricken cries—a succession of crashes as the two logs dashed earthward.

The swarthy man half way up, who had been directing the rising log, a task for which he was chosen on account of his great strength and cool judgment, turned a lightning backward somersault without pausing to look where he might land. As he turned over he twisted in the air, caught a support, and swung himself easily to safety. For a moment he contemplated the tragedy below, then like a cat sprang upward through the trestle. The others merely closed their eyes and hung on.

Of the two freed logs the upper bounced from support to support, finally resting in the trestle itself. But the one that had been on its way to remedy the weakness turned slightly sideways and glanced off into the group of frozen bohunks below. The trestle trembled from end to end.

Torrance did not follow the course of the falling logs. All that mattered at such a moment was the fate of his great work. He saw the quiver run through it—felt it in his own body—heard the creaking of ropes and blots, and there flashed through him a horror that he had not provided for a strain like that. When the trestle held its place, a great surge of pride and joy swept over him, but his knees were trembling.

When his eyes returned to earth, the bohunks were in flight, almost to a man, though danger was past. Only Conrad, Koppy, and Lefty Werner were straining at the log that held down their crushed comrades. Torrance sprang forward and bent his great back to

the weight. Two fewer bohunks were on construction in Canada.

Some one dropped from the trestle close to Torrance, and a hand thrust itself before the contractor's eyes. In the hand was the end of a rope. Torrance looked from it to the dusky Indian face above it.

"Cut!" jerked the halfbreed. "Thar's more up thar."

Torrance reached out slowly and took the rope, incredulous.

"'Twan't bolted," said the halfbreed. "An' then that."

A wave of crimson deepened the tan on Torrance's face. Whirling on the group beside him, he struck viciously, and Koppy hurtled over the log and lay as still as his dead companions. Instantly Conrad was on the Pole, running his hands swiftly over the unconscious body. With a satisfied smile he drew a knife from a leather sheath fastened inside the trouserband, and thrust it into his own belt.

"You did well to strike quickly," he muttered to Torrance. "A bullet would be the proper thing, but we've no direct proof; the Police would ask questions. He'll be round in a minute."

Torrance was examining the severed rope.

"Where did you find this, Mavy?"

The halfbreed pointed aloft. "Lower end o' the support the pulley was fastened to. Thar's more."

Torrance was restraining himself for lack of victims on whom to vent his wrath; Werner had retired to a discreet distance. Koppy was sitting weakly on the

log, wondering what had happened. The contractor reached out one big hand and jerked him to his feet.

"Now, you—! I'll give you twenty minutes to round up them cusses of yours and get them up in that trestle. The Indian here'll show you what you got to do. And you'll stand right under all the time—and you'll stand there every time we work on the trestle. I'm going to make it worth your skin to stop this thing. And if after to-day I find a rope cut or a bolt missing I'll smash you to pulp. And Big Jim Torrance don't go back on his word. . . . What's more, you and the other dogs won't be paid for the time it takes to fix things up."

He closed his powerful fist on the Pole's shoulder so tightly that the man's face twisted.

"You think you're going to bust this job up, you and your gang. I'm telling you that before you succeed you'll wish you'd stayed in jail in your own country. I don't know what you got against the trestle, but I do know you're a hellish cuss I'm going to break to the halter. If you count to bust things up here, I'll see that the busting falls on your own head. Scat!"

CHAPTER IX

TORRANCE EVOLVES A PLAN

"WERE they—real dead, daddy? Couldn't we—can't we do anything?" Horror stared from Tressa's eyes; she was trembling from head to foot. "I thought you or—or Adrian were under it, and I almost fell over. I'd have fainted if I hadn't thought you might need me."

The big man laid his arm across the shaking shoulders and drew her to him.

"I guess it was Adrian before your old dad."

"No—I don't think so." She continued naïvely: "Adrian's so quick; I don't think he'd be caught like that. It was you I thought of—too."

He smiled a little wistfully. "That's right, little girl, be honest. We all had it—once. When your mother was alive there was no one counted but 'Jim.' God, if I could hear her say it now! . . . 'Jim.'" He lingered over the word, repeating it in reverent whisper. "It was 'Jim' kept me straight them days. . . . Just the little word 'Jim.' I've always thought if I could die with that in my ears, perhaps there might—might open up a bit of a chance for the big rough fellow who hasn't had much chance to get away from things that make men rougher. . . . 'Jim.' . . . Now I'll have to kick out without it."

The girl in his arms was frightened of him when he

talked that way; and it was happening more frequently in these days of worry. She had scarcely known her mother, except through the lips of her daddy, but the woman who touched only the fringes of her memory was to her, as to him, a being not quite of this earth.

“‘Jim,’” she whispered, scarce knowing she said it.

His arms closed convulsively, and she could feel his beating heart.

“Say it to me—sometimes—won’t you, little girl?” he whispered.

But she was suddenly conscious of treading sacred ground.

“I don’t think I can, daddy. It’s mother’s, mother’s own. You’re my daddy, and there’s nothing as good as that to me.”

He smiled lovingly down on her, tossing aside his depression.

“And a daddy couldn’t have anything better—no, not if he searched this whole wide Canada through from terminal to terminal. I’m just about the luckiest dog this side Heaven.

‘Just one girl,
There is just one girl;
There may be others, I know,
But they’re not my pearl.
Sun or rain,
She is just the same;
I’ll be happy forever with
Just one girl.’”

The song was coarse and toneless, but he knew no other way of voicing it, and she noted nothing of its crudeness.

"Daddy, you're a base deceiver."

She was wagging an accusing finger before his eyes, and he blinked in exaggerated concern.

"O' course," he admitted, "I don't say I've had much chance with more than one. This job of mine is death to gallivanting. I wouldn't know how to look at a woman now—not in a way that would mean she was more to me than one of the same sex as the best little girl in the world."

But the silently accusing finger continued to wag.

"Honest, I don't know what you mean."

"What about the cow-girl last year that you bought the horses from?"

He chuckled deep in his throat.

"Shucks! I know a pretty girl when I see one, that's all. I knew how to appreciate that skin of hers, and her riding, and the way she lifted her feet when she walked, and how she wore her clothes—though they weren't much, were they? And I bet they don't half prize her where she comes from. A chap like me who's known the two best women in the world can spot a real pippin any time; and he sort of owes it to the world to pass the message along. Shucks, girl! You didn't think—say, you didn't think I was sidling up to her, or anything like that? All I did was to touch her arm. I wanted to see if they were all alike, like yours. And look what she gave me!"

He made a grimace and drew a finger along a dim line cutting down his cheek.

"She couldn't have been the nice girl I thought,"

he reflected, "or she wouldn't have got on her high-and-mighty just for a little thing like that."

"Anyway," sighed the girl, snuggling deeper in his arms, "I was real proud of you when she brought that quirt across your face, and your cheek all bleeding, and it looked as if your eye was gone. You just laughed and borrowed my handkerchief."

He laughed again now. "You didn't think I'd slam at her with one of these big fists, did you? I believe I kind of enjoyed wiping away the blood."

"And you paid her every cent without a word."

"O' course! That hadn't anything to do with our little tiff. Didn't I owe the money? I got them horses cheap enough, goodness knows! I'd take a thousand of them any day in the week she trotted 'em along. Easiest way to make a fortune I know."

Tressa eased herself away to look gravely in his face. "Did you ever think those horses might be stolen ones?"

"Not more'n I could help," he grinned. "It wasn't any of my business; she offered them at a reasonable price—"

"You set the price."

"The buyer always does, my dear—when he can. Ten dollars was only a starter; I'd have given five times as much. They've been the best horses I've had." He stopped with a sudden inspiration. "Say, come to think of it, they're the very ones we've been losing lately. Looks as if some one else is a good judge of horseflesh."

"I hope they don't touch Doll and Prince. Surely nobody would come right up here to our own stable!"

"Not while Big Jim Torrance and booze don't get mixing company too free. You didn't used to think so much of Doll—but that was before she was broke. You're getting your riding legs pretty quick, I say. We'll sell them before we pull out. They're real prairie horses; they wouldn't be happy down East. Just the same," he murmured, after a long pause, "I'd give a week's pay to know who got them horses. Perhaps the camps out west needed brightening up their horse-power, and they've done it at my expense. If we could have got on the trail of the last lot that nearly went over the rapids—but there's nobody can trail in this camp." He smote his knee with a loud smack. "By hickory! Why didn't I think of the Indian before?"

"Peter Maverick?"

"Sure. The only Indian we got. He did me a good turn to-day on that trestle. Never saw an Indian couldn't follow a trail, if there was whisky or a horse at the end of it . . . and I never saw a likelier one than Mavy. Might be worth my while to get in ahead of the Mounted Police. They had to be told, you know."

"Did you tell them how you got the horses, daddy?"

The big man looked grieved. "Do you think your dad has lost *all* his senses? But this smashing of things was getting too common, and they'd have found out about the horses and wondered why I hadn't called them in. I don't think they'd favour buying strange

horses at ten dollars a head and trying to look innocent about it. It isn't any use arguing with them—but *you* got common sense. *You* wouldn't suspect your old dad of receiving stolen property—at ten per; but them Mounted Police will ask for a birth certificate for every blessed one. I haven't time to look into the pedigree of every horse I buy. I'm busy. The Police are so unreasonable when it comes to law."

"That's why," he went on, after a thoughtful silence, "I'd like to steer them off the horse question. There's lots else for them to do. . . .Why didn't I think of Mavy before?"

He went to the edge of the bank and whistled. Ten minutes later Conrad was with them.

"Koppy got them repairs done yet?"

"Pretty nearly," replied the foreman.

"When the Indian can get away, send him up . . . or maybe we'd better wait till after hours—if he wouldn't ask overtime."

"You'll never find him after hours; he doesn't sleep in the camp. Wanders off somewhere in the bush. He has about as much use for white trash as you have."

"Send him right away then."

CHAPTER X

MAVY TAKES A RISK

MAVY, known on the camp books as Peter Maverick, received the summons to the boss's shack with his customary silence. For a moment after Conrad delivered the message he hesitated, then, nodding shortly, he swung into the trestle and began to clamber up by way of the hundred and fifty feet of network supports, scorning the path that led up the bank before the foreman's shack. With a puzzled shake of his head Conrad watched the strange figure growing smaller.

"A hundred of him," he muttered, "and they could take the whole bunch of bohunks. If he's a specimen of the wild Indian, Lord only knows what right we had to clean them out of the land. Mr. Torrance would say it was because they never build railways."

To the bohunks, mildly staring after the vanishing halfbreed, his method of reaching the top was merely foolishly exhausting; but several weeks of acquaintance had taught them to accept his silent peculiarities with nothing more than casual wonder, though they disliked him for his unsociability, for the cold contempt that twisted his lips, and for the stifled volcano that smouldered within his squinting eyes. They hated him more than ever now, with a hatred that could be liquidated only in blood. Their own criminal schemes

that had taken the lives of two of their companions they did not consider, but the man who had exposed the cause of the deaths, and had made them sweat unrequited hours for exercising the only weapon they knew in their relentless fight against their bosses, must answer to them for his temerity and treason. Hereafter the halfbreed was just prey; sooner or later he would fall before the slumbering fires that knew no law but the knife, no restraint but fear.

Torrance looked up at the shadow in the doorway.

"Hey? Where did you come from?"

"Yuh sent fer me, didn't yuh?"

"I thought you were down bossing the Koppy job."

"Sartin. We jest was through when he tol' me."

"But Conrad only got down there; I saw him."

Torrance squinted sternly at the halfbreed.

Mavy nodded. "I come by the trestle."

"The h— you did!"

The halfbreed shrugged his shoulders. The contractor examined him with renewed interest.

"How'd you like to be an underforeman?"

Again the wide, sloping shoulders shrugged.

"Say, you don't mean you'd turn down an extra dollar a day?"

"Koppy's underforeman, ain't he?" The halfbreed spat with disgust, and Torrance chuckled sympathetically.

"If I did that every time I felt like it about Koppy, I'd be as dry as a camp-meeting in three days. You're not afraid of him, are you?"

Mavy grinned.

"Because Koppys going to be some busy for the next few weeks hanging out under that trestle, and we'll need another underforeman perhaps."

The squinting eyes took on a sudden gleam, even a keen anticipation that could not escape the contractor's attention.

"An' wud I be bossin' 'em about, them bohunks? Wud yuh let me do as I liked?"

"Well," smiled Torrance, "not quite what you liked; you'd be under the foreman and me, you know."

The halfbreed sighed. "That's allus the way. Suthin's allus foolin' me. 'Cause ef yuh'd gi' me a free hand thar'd be a dozen er so less bohunks the fus' night fer supper. I jes' natcherl hate hidin' my feelin's." He repeated the sigh more hopelessly. "Yuh'd never git the work did; thar ain't bohunks enough in the world."

Torrance clutched his hand; here in an unexpected quarter was a man to his liking.

"If I could," he whispered, "I'd make you foreman this instant, and round up all the bohunks out of jail. But that ain't what I want you for. Are you a real Indian?"

"Naw," drawled Mavy. "I'm a Chineese, with a bit o' Pole thrown in."

Torrance showed he could appreciate humour like that. "I mean, can you follow a trail?"

The halfbreed's eyes danced. "Take a run in the bush," he said proudly, "an' to-morrow I'll take yuh over it agin t' the foot. Kin I foller a trail! Gorskizzle! It's wot I done most o' my born days."

The contractor ruminated. Much as he dreaded the interference of the Police in the matter of the stolen horses, he hesitated about entrusting their recovery to this strange Indian; and a tardy thought came to him that the Police might question it. He cast the die in favour of his first plan.

"You know them horses we been losing?"

Mavy kept his eyes fixed on the contractor's face, but he knew the location of door and window with the unerring sense of the trapped wild thing.

"If you can find the thief—or who he is—there's under-foreman's pay for you. A dollar a day more—if money's any use to you. Will you take it on?"

"No."

The reply was prompt and uncompromising. Torrance, flaming as usual before unexpected opposition, was about to fire him on the spot, when the noise of metal against metal drew Tressa to the door.

"It's Constable Williams and a new Policeman—a Sergeant. Father's here, Mr. Williams. He was sending for you. There's been a dreadful accident. A piece of the trestle fell and killed two of the men."

As Tressa stepped back to let the Policeman enter, the halfbreed slid unobtrusively to the other side of the room and stood in the semi-obscurity facing the doorway, his back tight against the wall.

"Yes," stormed Torrance, "and if it had killed a dozen of them it would have served them right. They'd taken out the bolts and cut a rope."

Constable Williams, blinking at the sudden darkness of the sitting room, stepped aside and made way for

a straight, bronzed figure wearing the stripes of a Sergeant, who was already acknowledging with a winning smile Tressa's unspoken welcome.

"Torrance, shake hands with Sergeant Mahon. He's been sent up to clear—"

The halfbreed, his squinting eyes staring as at a ghost, seemed to make only a single movement. Then the entire window crashed out, and a pair of heavy boots disappeared over the sill.

For one brief moment the contractor and his daughter were stupefied. Not so Sergeant Mahon. With the crash he was at the door, tugging at his belt. But Tressa was in the way, and by the time he reached the open only a tiny cloud of dust rising above the edge of the steep drop to the river bottom told the way the halfbreed had gone.

The Sergeant rushed to the bank and looked down the hundred-and-fifty foot wall with a gasp. No need for a revolver there. With a shudder he drew back.

Torrance stormed up beside him, rifle in hand.

"Where is he? Why don't you shoot? Let me—"

The Sergeant, with a deft twist, secured the rifle.

"What's he been doing?"

"Doing?" yelled the contractor. "Didn't you see that whole window—didn't you—"

"We don't shoot men for that."

Tressa came to the rescue:

"He's an Indian, one of the bohunks. I didn't know he'd done anything. We were talking to him when you came. Daddy wanted to make him underfore-

man, but he refused. And now"—she peered in awe over the edge—"he's killed."

"Guilty conscience, I guess," commented the Sergeant. "Lots of them are taken that way when they see the uniform—though I don't recall quite such a sudden and successful attempt at suicide."

"Suicide!" snorted Torrance, who was lying down where he could see the scene below. "Suicide nothing! That chap's a human cat—or he ain't human at all. He came up by the trestle; this is just another way to get down. Look at that dust! He's not falling, not him! He's just kicking up a dust so we can't see, and all the time he's breaking his up record. He's not dropping fast enough to hurt himself . . . but, by hickory! where he finds toe-holds on that cliff beats me."

They were all craning over. Down below, the bohunks were scattering like frightened sheep, while those further out gaped. The dust-cloud struck the bottom and spread, and out of it emerged a running figure, limping a little but covering the ground with surprising speed. Tag ends of clothing hung to him, and from head to foot he was the colour of earth.

Torrance cheered. "Hurrah! I'm surer than ever I made no mistake offering him the job . . . and I'll pay for the window myself, by hickory!"

Mahon was watching him with a faint smile.

"It's a lively reception to give a stranger. Is there more to the programme?"

"If there is," replied Torrance, "I'm only one of the innocent audience. That guy's beaten the limit three times inside as many hours. He's a continuous performance. He did a few careless flips and tumbles down there to get out of the way of that pole, then he swings up by way of the trestle while you'd say 'Jack Robinson.' He's gone down again," he added, measuring with his eye the dizzy height, "by way of Providence. Wouldn't you say he'd got the wrong job out here, even if he is an Indian?"

"Was it Mavy?" asked Constable Williams.

"We call him Mavy, but he's a blooming sparrow, or a toy balloon."

"An Indian who's been working on construction," Williams explained to his superior, "a strange, silent fellow. Always seemed a bit above the job. Peter Maverick was his name."

Mahon started violently. His heart had made a bound that almost suffocated him. Before his eyes swept a picture of a court of so-called justice, with a big halfbreed giving evidence for the Police in a rustling case. The Judge, ignorantly persisting in his demand for a name for a child of nature who had all his life been content with "Blue Pete," had swallowed an invention of the moment, though every rancher in the room laughed at the ludicrously unfit term they knew so well. "Peter Maverick," the halfbreed had replied without a smile.

The Sergeant closed his eyes with a weary shake of the head. The picture had faded before another—the halfbreed wounded to death by a bullet he had drawn

to his own chest to save the Police friend for whom it was intended.

"Know him?" enquired the Constable curiously.

Mahon passed a hand across his moist brow. "I knew a cowboy once—best friend I ever had—best a man could have. He gave that name once because he had no other to give. . . . He, too, was part Indian. Peter's a common Indian name. . . . He's dead now. He gave his life for me."

"That was Blue Pete, wasn't it?" asked Williams. "We got some of the story up here. He was working with us down there at Medicine Hat, wasn't he?"

The Sergeant moved toward the shack. "That drop makes me dizzy."

Within the shack Tressa laid a sympathetic hand on his.

"You'd better tell us about it, hadn't you? You're thinking a lot."

He smiled sadly into her tender eyes. "There's not much to tell," he began, "at least, not in quantity. Blue Pete was the whitest man that ever lived, the whitest of any colour. Yet he died a rustler—giving his life gladly for one who had done nothing more for him than call him friend. He was no rustler at heart. For years he had stolen horses and cattle in the Badlands of Montana, because, as he said, every one rustled there, more or less; he was brought up to it. Perhaps he did a bit more than the others, but that was because he knew more tricks. I came on him just north of the border. He'd come across before the

rifles of two cowboys who hated him so badly they'd quite forgotten that he could have picked them off with ease any time he wished. Though he was the best shot in the Badlands, he never used his rifle till he had to; and for days he'd been running before them."

He looked about the room, feeling the silence. To him it was as a tribute to his dead friend.

"I took him in to the Inspector. He became a detective for us. You see, the rustlers were getting a bit the better of us because they knew the Cypress Hills and we never had force enough to take time to study them. Blue Pete didn't need to. He could pick up a trail anywhere and follow it like a blood-hound. . . . I learned a little from him; that's why I'm up here. With his assistance we ran down some of the rustlers. It was he proved to us that our own ranchers were among the rustlers—proved it to his own destruction. It was at the trial of one of them that he received the blow that sent him wild again. For a week he'd been on the trail of that fellow, a man we'd long suspected, half rancher, half hotel-keeper, and his nerves were a bit raw from lack of sleep and being forced into the open. You see, it meant giving up all the cow-punching he loved, for no rancher would employ him then."

A flash of anger lit the Sergeant's face.

"The Judge questioned his evidence—doubted it—even censured the Police for using such an acknowledged rustler. . . . Pete left the courtroom straight for the old game . . . and I, his old friend—I was put on his track. It was my duty. In the meantime

some of his old companions from the Badlands crossed the border. I don't know whether Blue Pete joined up with them or not. If he did there are so many things can't be explained. We caught a few of them—including a white girl who—who also had gone wild. She was—a friend of mine, too, once. When we caught her brothers, who owned one of the best ranches in the district, the 3-bar-Y, and they—killed themselves, she just broke away. She and Blue Pete worked together. I think they loved each other. It was a crazy venture of hers that put her in our hands. She got six months. . . .

"It was spring when she came out, early spring this year. A gang of Badland rustlers got into the Hills. We surrounded them, and I went in with one companion on a trail of blood from a lucky shot we'd got at them when they tried to break through for the border. The wounded man ambushed me . . . but Blue Pete—he'd been creeping along beside me all the time—took the bullet instead of me. He managed to tell me the rustlers' rendezvous, and then something struck me on the head and I dropped. My companion came to my assistance then. I guess I was half-crazy from the blow, and from the awful wound I'd seen in Pete's chest, because when we closed in on the rendezvous that night I took fool chances. I jumped in alone. Dutch Henry had my life in his hands when Blue Pete fired from the shadows. . . . Somehow he'd dragged himself there to be on hand. He saved my life again. . . . He died for it."

Constable Williams cleared his throat. Torrance

was silent. Tressa leaned forward and touched Mahon's sleeve.

"You didn't bury him in a cemetery? He'd hate it."

"We never found his body. Mira Stanton, the girl I told you of, buried him where we never could find. She wrote us . . . and she hated us. There's a rough stone to his memory down there on the edge of the Cypress Hills. It reminds the few of us who see it of my friend, simple, plain, rugged, lasting. There's no name on it, just 'Greater Love.'"

"You didn't find him? What was he like?" Tressa's face was flushed.

"A big, slouching sort of figure, but with a world of muscle you'd never suspect. The face of an Indian, but lighter; it's bluish tint gave him his name. A smile that made you forget anything but that he was your friend; a square jaw, squinting eyes—"

"Was his face very thin, almost haggard, with hollows under the eyes, and one shoulder lower than the other?"

Mahon smiled at her excitement. "No, his face lurked a little heavily, waiting only for that wonderful smile, but it wasn't haggard. And his shoulders were twin towers of strength."

"Oh," she sighed, "then it isn't him."

"I can assure you, Miss Torrance, that there's not a grain of hope to raise. Whom does my friend resemble?"

"Why, Peter Maverick—just some ways."

For a moment he seemed startled, almost frightened, then he smiled indulgently.

"It only means they're both of Indian strain, have crooked eyes (a not uncommon combination), and happened to toy with the same invented name that is taken from the herds. Nothing more. . . . If I thought Blue Pete would throw himself through a window and down a bank like that at sight of me—"

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "He wouldn't, of course. But wouldn't it have been a story?"

"The sort of story that never happens even in books," he sighed.

CHAPTER XI

THE DESERTED CAMP

THREE low taps sounded on the side of Kopy's shack. The underforeman rose and, standing well back in the gloom of the interior, peered through the open door to the boss's shack beside the grade. Then he went to the window that opened on the woods, swung it open, and without looking through whistled softly. Three men moved furtively across the opening and waited.

Kopy stepped to the door and carelessly examined the sky, drew tobacco and cigarette papers and rolled himself a smoke. Then, yawning lazily, he reached back and pulled the door shut and strolled away out of sight round the corner of the shack. With a nasty laugh to the three men waiting there he led the way back through the window.

"Boss watching. Door closed—me not here."

One of the three men, a pair of golden hoops dangling from his ears, lifted a listening hand. From below broke the loud music of the orchestra.

"Boss think-a me there," he sneered. "Boss easy guy. Morani's orchestra, he say. Morani here." He struck himself dramatically on the chest.

"Not so easy maybe, boss ain't," Kopy shook a doubting head. "Big and strong and—and thick here," touching his head. "Maybe—I don't know."

From a pouch of tobacco which Koppy had thrown on the table they were rolling themselves cigarettes; it seemed to be a common stock of which the Pole, in deference to his rank, had the guardianship. One of the men struck a match thoughtfully.

"Get it out of your noodles that the boss don't know nothing. He gets there mighty spry sometimes. He's had too much of things lately to keep his eyes shut. We got to work pretty slick, I say."

Koppy straightened with a show of resentment.

"He never had the Workers before. We take him like that"—he closed one big dirty fist with a relentless movement—"and we crush him, like we crush all our bosses."

"All right, Koppy." The other puffed a ring of smoke. "I wish you're right, if it makes you sleep better. I'm in on the crushing game. Course the Workers make a difference. All the difference in the world," he added hastily, catching Koppy's glowering glance. "But we got to go smooth, I say, all the same-e. He's getting suspicious. That whiffer he belted you to-day on the saloon-sign ought to about hold you for a while. When your toes curled over that log I thought we'd be measuring you for a coffin."

The face of the underforeman went livid; a flood of foul expletives clogged his utterance.

The one who had not yet spoken broke in soothingly:

"Lefty just means he hit you hard. Why no somebody knife him?"

The four men asked each other the question with

their eyes and, receiving no answer, looked confused.

"Why no you, Heppel?" demanded Koppy. "I had no time."

"Time wasn't hanging about loose when he let drive," grinned Lefty Werner.

"Mr. Conrad took your knife, Koppy," soothed Heppel. "You couldn't."

Morani, unobserved, had drawn from some hidden part of him a long stiletto and was whetting it slowly on the palm of his hand. Fascinated, they watched.

"We were a hundred to two," reflected Koppy in a low voice; and his eyes were puzzled.

That was as far as they ever got in the solution of the eternal puzzle of how one man holds a hundred under his thumb and sleeps the sleep of the unafraid.

"Which ain't quite to the point," Werner reminded them, "with this meeting due in half an hour. In the first place, are you sure the boss ain't on?"

The Pole lifted his shoulders haughtily.

"I do it—I, the president of the Independent Workers of the World."

"All right, old cock, but *what* do you do?"

"The orchestra." Morani waved a satisfied hand toward the music. "It play. No come-a to meeting."

"Can't say I'm sorry," muttered Werner under his breath.

"Men—many men—they play cards where boss can see," said Heppel, mildly chiding the lack of faith in his fellow-conspirator. "Camp same, boss think. Meeting in bush same time. Everything fine."

The local president of the Workers of the World

spread his hands out in modest deprecation of such applause. Werner seemed convinced.

"You'd pull the wool over the eyes of a professional burglar, Koppy, while you stole his jemmy. But what's the idea of the meeting to-night? A crash—right off the bat?"

Koppy shrugged his shoulders; everything was in the lap of the gods; inspiration was one of his holds on his followers.

"'Cause every damn one of them will do what you say," Werner assured him, "from waiting to say grace before tackling the soup, to blowing that trestle to perdition. That is, if they can do it in the dark."

"In dark—it is our way," returned the leader crisply. "Laws? Bah! For the bosses they are, like everything else. We work down here." He passed a flat hand low above the floor.

"A bit lower than that, ain't it?" said Werner, hiding a smile.

"We cut off the feet of our bosses so they fall."

"Everybody take a high seat and keep your feet out of the water!" cried the irrepressible one. "But you want to make sure you don't cut so low the bosses hop out of the way. But I guess you're right—you're always right, Koppy. We got to do things in the dark, till we get the Labour Unions at our back. But they're a glass of water when it comes to the real thing."

With an imperceptible movement Morani's knife was out again, swishing back and forward across his palm with a low hissing sound. And every eye was rivetted on it. Koppy dragged his away and spoke:

"You three, you go to boss—"

Werner gave a startled exclamation.

"Meeting for that," Koppy went on relentlessly.

"We send you three to talk to boss—"

"I never was no talker, Koppy, you know that," protested Werner.

But Morani continued to whet his knife with smiling unction.

"You see boss," said Koppy, "and demand we boss ourselves—that I boss or job stops. We Workers know no boss; we please ourselves. We boss out here. If any one say no—slash!"

He struck downward with his right hand, as he would gladly strike when he had the chance. And Morani repeated the movement, only far more subtly and efficiently. Werner stumbled to his feet, his eyes on Morani's stiletto.

"Here, you butcher, I'm not a boss. Keep that sticker away from my shins. Put it up, Morani, for God's sake! You don't need practice."

Koppy motioned him roughly back to the bunk on which he had been lying.

"You three tell boss that."

"Like hell I do!" grumbled Werner, "when I'm off my nut."

"Like-a hell I do," repeated Morani fervently.

"Like hell I do," agreed Heppel solemnly.

"Like hell you all do," Koppy summed up acidly.

"And your precious skin—" began Werner.

"I order."

The unmistakable warning in the abrupt retort si-

lenced Werner for the moment; the distant peril seemed the less ominous.

"There's no hurry," he suggested after an interval. "He thinks he's got the hole almost filled, but we can hold him up any time by pulling down some more of the trestle—"

"And I stand under!" snapped Koppy.

"Well, of course, you don't need to. You're president of The Independent Workers of the World."

Koppy glanced at him from beneath lowering brows, but Werner assumed a look of blankest innocence as he rolled himself a fresh cigarette.

"Or," he reflected, "we might leave some one behind to blow it up after it's finished."

"Never finished," declared Koppy. "The bosses must know the Workers have spoken."

"But three of us, I notice, are to do all the speaking," Werner growled to himself. "Next thing to being President of the United States I'd be president of the Workers of the World—and the last's the safest job."

Koppy went to the window and looked through into the darkening shadows. A man slid through the undergrowth out there and disappeared. Several more drifted in and out of sight. As he looked, a half hundred passed furtively, slinking along, silent, moving back into the bush and the shadows, a procession of guilty mutes, glancing neither to right nor left, held to their course by the promise of the coming gathering.

"Come," ordered Koppy. "We go."

He lit the lamp and opened the door, and they climbed through the way they had entered. Outside they became as part of their fellow conspirators, crouching, silent, grim.

Over the bank came the sound of the orchestra, blaring with forced lung the message of the ordinary camp life. Half a dozen small groups idled on the ground before the cook-houses. A few walked lazily about the stables, and two white-aproned cooks passed from cook-house to cook-house on the night preparations for the morning meal. Outwardly everything was above suspicion.

Tressa thought so, as she stood beside her father in the doorway and looked out over the scene, while behind them Conrad read aloud the newest book to reach them. But her father was not at ease.

"Morani's giving us more than our money's worth to-night," he muttered, during a pause in the reading. "It should be made a law that every dirty bohunk had to join an orchestra, so a fellow could keep an ear on 'em when he can't see 'em. They're not likely to do much harm with a tin whistle between their lips."

"It's a beastly quiet night," he complained, when Conrad paused to light the lamp.

"I thought it was noisier down there than usual," said Tressa.

Conrad came behind them and stood without a word, when the eyes of the two men met significantly.

"Guess I'll be turning in," the younger man yawned. "It's been a bit of a hard day."

He turned back to place the book on the shelf, carefully marking the page. Tressa was there beside him, and her father was standing on the step with his back to them; but the young lover did not seem to see her. She walked with him to the top of the path leading down to his shack, but he only muttered an absent-minded good-night and left her, hastening down the path, knowing nothing of the hot tears behind.

He did not stop at his own door but passed on to the camp, all the time listening intently. The camp clamour was there, but it was forced, less general. He hurried his steps.

In the shadow of the first canvas covered walls he knew what he would find. Pushing suddenly open the door of one of the largest bunk-houses, he faced an empty room, though the lamps were lit. In another were two men instead of twenty, both lustily and unmusically blowing mouth-organs. Further on three before a door were making the noise of ten.

And then over the whole camp fell a sudden silence. In some strange way all knew he was there. Some animal instinct—or was it a dim sound from the corner of a near-by shack—made the foreman leap further into the open. A knife whistled past his shoulder and thudded into a door-sill across the way, where it stuck, quivering. Without excitement he pulled his automatic and stepped into the light from the open door. But he did not pause or turn.

The full course of the camp he paced, whistling lightly through his teeth, and every ray of light he passed glinted on the barrel of his pistol. Sheer de-

fiance it was, but it succeeded. At the stables he turned about and retraced the crooked street.

Reaching the edge of the camp, he quickened his pace and where the shadows permitted ran swiftly up the slope to the grade. There he paused to recover his breath. In response to his warble Tressa opened the door. Conrad looked beyond her to her father and nodded.

"Almost empty," he said. "They're holding a pow-wow somewhere. Look out for squalls. Better keep the doors locked these nights, and fasten the windows so no one can get in."

"I'll lock the stable." The only menace Tressa could realise was the stealing of the horses.

Conrad crept over the grade; but he did not drop down the path to his shack. Instead he entered the bush. It was not so dark yet that he could not make good speed, once his eyes became accustomed to it. The northern bush was not thick, and the foliage failed to hide a star-filled sky of wonderful brilliance that overhangs the earth nowhere as in the Canadian West. By some bush-sense, aided by much good luck, he kept straight ahead until he arrived above the camp. A few minutes of search found him Koppy's shack. Though the door was open and the light burning, no one was there. Conrad hurried on.

Even before he was conscious of assistance from his ears he knew he was approaching a great gathering of men. He was picking his way as carefully as he knew how, but he was no woodsman; now and then a twig snapped and his heart beat nervously.

The first hint that he was heard came with the winding of an arm like a band of steel round his neck, while another held his arms to his side so that he could not fight. The hand about his neck dropped instantly to his mouth, as he braced himself against the relentless grip. Then he knew that his captor was as anxious as he not to be heard.

He was lifted from his feet, his head still in chancery and his mouth closed. He could hear the meeting breaking up, the crunching passage of the silent bohunks returning to the camp. Suddenly he was dropped, and a shadow faded noiselessly into the other shadows of night.

"Mavy!" he called in a low voice. "Mavy!"

Only two dull taps came back to him from the shadows.

CHAPTER XII

SERGEANT MAHON SKIRTS DEATH

BLUE PETE, alias Peter Maverick, alias anything that seemed to suit the varied occasions of his checkered career, thrust aside the curtain of foliage covering the hiding place of his new raft. There was no reason why he should visit the raft just then; he could have no possible use for it until he had in his hands those two horses up in Torrance's stable. But ever since he had been forced to knock Koppy's pointing rifle from his hands to save Juno the halfbreed had been oppressed by a thousand fears.

He did not understand the bohunks—he did not want to. In his vivid life he had met most kinds of men, but the wild Continental scum that took to railway construction as its own special line of effort was beyond his experience. Hitherto he had been able to anticipate the villainies of his enemies—and in some of them he himself had revelled—but no one had yet charted the designs of creatures like Koppowski and his comrades.

Even as the foliage parted Blue Pete knew why he had looked. The raft was gone. He was not surprised, but his anger was none the less for that. With a muffled oath he let the foliage fall and dropped to the ground with the intuitive sense of the wild at evidence of an enemy.

A moment's thought raised him to his feet again, to strike recklessly back along the river's brink into the bush. Koppy and his crew, he knew, were busy about the bridge at that hour; the whole out-of-doors was his.

Blue Pete, a name once on the lips of every rancher and cowboy, sheriff and Mounted Policeman, from the Montana Badlands to Medicine Hat—once cowboy and rustler, again cowboy and Mounted Police detective, then thrown back to rustling by the blindness of a political judge—was not now the model of physical fitness of a year ago when his rifle and rope were respected over a prairie Province and State. The bullet that had brought mistaken mourning to the Police, and particularly to Sergeant Mahon, the friend for whom it was intended, had come within a hair's breadth of avenging Bilsy and Dutch Henry, the Montana rustlers who had hated him so. What he had escaped was due to his wonderful physique and to the untiring care of Mira Stanton.

With her his sole nurse and doctor, he had lain in one of their many retreats in the Cypress Hills until he was strong enough to entrust himself to the pace of the faithful Whiskers for the slow and painful journey to more expert treatment across the border. There he recovered rapidly. But Bilsy's bullet had extracted its toll. The blue-black face was darker now and more leathery, as if the blood behind were running more sluggishly. His cheeks were fallen in, and great hollows showed beneath the squinting eyes. It made him more the Indian than ever in appearance.

He had lost weight and bulk, and the shoulder above the wound was an inch lower than its mate.

Time would perhaps return him his old form, as it had his strength. But time was the very thing Blue Pete could not wait for.

Recklessly as he commenced his return along the banks of the river, instinct won; in a few steps he was moving with all the old soundlessness. Twigs and crackling leaves seemed to evade his feet; eye and ear were ever alert. Though he knew he was alone in the bush, the way of a lifetime refused to sleep within him. By a circuitous route he approached a tangle of trees that hung out from a steep projection in the rising sides of the ravine. His eyes were flitting now about at his feet, and sometimes he carefully passed a boot over marks only he could detect. Once, whistling in soft surprise, he scattered a handful of spruce needles.

Into the heart of the thickest clump of trees he disappeared. The green fell behind him, the woods was lifeless again.

In the dim light of the cave Mira knew he was worried, but he would tell her when it was good for her to know.

"It's gone," he growled, after a long silence.

In their intimate way she understood.

"Perhaps it broke loose."

He looked his surprise that she should imagine he had not satisfied himself. She came to him and laid tender hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry, Pete, for your sake. Really it doesn't matter. We could go now—"

He moved away from her, not irritably; he just could not trust himself to refuse her anything.

"Thar's them two horses yet 'fore we got 'em all back."

"Can't we buy them? They ain't worth the trouble and risk."

He shook his head doggedly.

"Not now. They're after me—again."

There was a rending sadness about it, as if some overwhelming desire had escaped him forever, some dreaded fear returned.

"But you can give up the job on the trestle any time you like. They can't touch you for that, can they?"

He had told her of the incident at the trestle, and the hatred now boiling in the breasts of the bohunks. But of the scene in Torrance's shack, of Sergeant Mahon, he had not said a word; he felt he dare not. That the Sergeant should be there oppressed and threatened him. Loving Mahon with the full strength of his wild nature, he vaguely foresaw the complications that might arise; and he wished to save Mira the worry of it as long as he could. He had no conscious thought that Mira's early infatuation for the Sergeant continued; he knew that he, halfbreed though he was, had her whole heart. The Sergeant's fancy for the prairie girl had been but the reaching out of his fine nature for the beautiful, where so little of the beautiful existed. His marriage to Mira's Eastern-trained cousin had spelled the end of that.

What the halfbreed dare not face was the discovery by the Police that he whom they thought dead was

alive. He was still on the Police black-books; in spite of their affection for him, he had months of rustling—if it was rustling—to pay for.

"Got to git them two horses—somehow," he persisted. "Then we kin start all over agin, you 'n' me. The P'lice can't hev anythin' agin us, when the horses are all back whar they belong."

He searched her face anxiously. So often they had talked it over, and always neither was quite satisfied. A conflict of emotions was in her face now; her life's dream was there, her great fear.

"They shouldn't be hard for you to get," she marvelled. "Far easier than the camp stables."

"I lef' 'em to the last. The boss is cuter'n a thousand bohunks. I wanted to be able to git clear away 'fore he got thinkin' too hard. . . . Las' night the stable was locked. Suthin's scared 'em."

"I don't understand why he hasn't told the Police. But I guess he knew they were stole—stolen when he bought them."

Juno lifted her head, ears pointing, and rumbled in her throat. Blue Pete grabbed the revolver he had discarded on his entry and thrust it into his belt. Then he vanished into the trees that covered the entrance.

Worming along the ground, another clump a stone's throw distant swallowed him. There in the darkness of a second cave he pressed the noses of the two horses, the familiar command to silence, and a moment later he was outside again.

Somewhere above on the hillside was a sound only

he and Juno could hear. Blue Pete looked through the leaves and saw Sergeant Mahon.

The Policeman was bent over the ground. Presently he moved slowly onward, eyes ever at his feet, dropping yard by yard down the tree-lined slope. Evidently dissatisfied with what his eyes told him, he stooped at times until his face was within a few inches of the dead leaves and moss; often he rose to full height and looked away toward the camp with a puzzled frown.

Lower and lower he sank toward the river's edge.

Blue Pete glided away before him. He himself had taught this man to trail, had roused in Mahon the quick eye of suspicion that questioned every turned leaf; and now he was to pay for it. Silently he cursed the luck of things. He was satisfied no prying eye about the camp could follow his tracks, but he had not counted on the Sergeant.

Down, step by step, moved Mahon, a zig-zag course that missed nothing. Nearer and nearer he approached the cave home of the one who was watching him with fevered eyes.

Blue Pete pictured the penalty he must pay were he taken now. Another week or two and it would be different. There were still the two horses in the boss's stable before his name was clear, and the bunch down in the Cypress Hills was waiting to be returned to their rightful owners. He could not face what the law would demand of him—Mira would not live through it. Imprisonment—disgrace—death to all the hopes that had sustained them both since his recovery!

On the trail of the unsuspecting Policeman he crept, and his face was grim and gaunt.

Where the river bottom ran more level, Mahon halted and looked about with a more general interest. The halfbreed felt safer, for he had taken greater precautions nearer the caves. But there was always the chance of a mistake, none knew it better than he who had profited so often from the mistakes of others. And Mira's horse might fail them at the vital moment; he had no fear of Whiskers.

Sergeant Mahon let his eyes fall to the ground again and started. Dropping to his knees, he bent close above the spot where the halfbreed had scattered the spruce needles not an hour before. With careful breath the Policeman blew. After a time he sank back on his heels and passed a hand across his forehead. All about him he peered with piercing eyes.

Blue Pete slowly drew the revolver from his belt.

Mahon came to his feet and moved forward, bent over the tell-tale moss and half overgrown sand. He was making straight for the cave.

The arm of the halfbreed lifted. Perspiration was breaking out on his swarthy face, and his left hand opened and closed. But his teeth were gritted, and the hand that held the gun was steady as steel. At least his old friend would never know who killed him.

A short ten yards from the cluster of trees that hid the cave Mahon stopped, a perplexed, self-deprecatory twist to his face, like a man who has been dreaming. Then he edged off toward the river, carelessly, smiling reflectively. The halfbreed wriggled after him.

For several minutes the Sergeant stood looking out across the water, then, shrugging his shoulders, skirted to the east and slowly climbed the bank.

Blue Pete threw himself on the ground, dark face pillowed in a shaking arm.

Mira came to him and touched his shoulder.

"I saw, Pete," she whispered huskily. "I, too, had him covered. . . . We'll have to move again."

He looked up into the loving face, his heart thumping so fiercely that his ears drummed. Suddenly he realised how much it meant to him that now he was the only one that counted; she would have pulled the trigger rather than risk his capture by the Police.

"You knew he was here?" There was no reproach in her voice.

"I didn't want to skeer yuh," he replied weakly.

She smiled: she could read him so well.

"We must cross the river and find a place over there," she decided. "The construction raft at the trestle will get the horses over. . . . If the Sergeant caught only a glimpse of Whiskers he'd know."

Blue Pete laughed. "When I git through with the ole gal her own mother wudn't know her. I ain't bin in the rustlin' game all these years not to pick up a few tricks to make a woman pinto look like a blood stallion."

"But if he ever saw us—either of us."

The halfbreed spent the evening pondering on that.

CHAPTER XIII

THE VISIT OF THE INDIANS

"TRESSA! Quick!"

But Tressa was too busy in the kitchen.

"Tressa Torrance. It's a free show—I wouldn't miss it. It's an epoch."

She came skipping through the door. "If it's only the trestle again—"

Torrance pointed dramatically across the trestle to the far bank. "This time it's our first callers." He turned to the pair of saddled horses tied to rings in the wall beyond the front door. "No, we're not riding to-night. We're entertaining. That is, if the local nabobs over there don't funk the trestle. I'd run the speeder over if I thought it wouldn't give them a fit. You never know what scares an Indian."

On the distant bank an Indian and his squaw were seated like statues on horses as motionless as themselves. The former, his horse seemingly on the very brink of the chasm, was leaning forward, his eyes shaded by his hand. The squaw, on higher ground, outlined against the sky, waited phlegmatically.

"Are you sure they're alive, daddy?"

"Certain. I saw Mrs. Indian's horse's tail flicker. Like to have a close-up, wouldn't you? Staring at us like that, it makes a fellow feel as if he's been stealing something of theirs and they're taking a good look in time for the scalping season."

He climbed the loose sand of the grade and waved.

The response was immediate. At a jerk of the squaw's hand her horse cantered down to where her lord had taken his stand. And for a time they sat side by side watching the distant welcome of the white man.

Suddenly the Indian's heels flew out and in, and the odd little broncho wheeled on its hind legs and swung into a wide circle. The squaw did not even look interested.

"Some rider, eh?" applauded Torrance. "If your old dad could ride like that he'd never have taken up railway building. Funny nag, that of his. Looks like a hobby horse come to life. What's he trying to tell us? Regrets he can't come? Or is it a challenge to bring my bow and arrow and settle the old feud? Anyway, it's a rattling good stunt—and I'd like to know the answer."

"I think he wants time to consider your invitation."

"By hickory, Tressa, another year and we'd have missed this. It takes only about one season to muddle up their riding with the white man's booze—or the white man's treaty money. Why don't we leave well enough alone—that is, if they'd let us build railways?"

The horse continued to gyrate, its rider performing the familiar Indian tricks—now leaning far over until his twin braids brushed the ground, now leaping off in full flight and on again as the horse came round in the circle; lying flat along the horse's side until only one leg from knee to foot was visible, leaning far over to peer at them under the horse's neck. As a

finale he stood erect while the broncho dashed headlong for the bank. At the very brink it dropped back with braced legs, and the Indian, leaping gracefully backward, turned a somersault and landed on his feet.

"By hickory!" Torrance whistled through his teeth. "I know a showman would swop his whole caboodle for half an hour of that. I wonder what I'm expected to do over here to hold up my end. I want to be civil. I don't know anything that wouldn't look cheap after that. Wish I'd done mine first. Hi, you!" He was adding voice to arms. "That trestle'll bear *you* anyway. Trot over and shake. Bring that little beast that looks like a horse, and I'll get you the biggest audience this side of Winnipeg."

Down in the camp half a thousand bohunks were watching every move.

The Indians had dismounted. He was pointing across the trestle. His squaw seemed to hesitate.

"If I made a sound like a bottle of fire-water," grinned Torrance, "he'd beat the record."

"You're not to let them have a drop. Now remember, daddy."

"The nearest bar's too far away to waste it on an Indian, my dear. But there's methyLATED spirits somewhere in the stores—and you've a bottle or two of flavoring extract, haven't you? All it needs is a smell. . . . They're tackling the trestle, Tressa. Bully for you, Big Chief! You got Murphy beat a mile. Must have heard us talking about fire-water. Wonderful ears, them Indians have."

Adrian Conrad, ready for his evening visit, slipped

his automatic in his pocket and hastened up the slope. He arrived as the squaw, with a nervous little run, covered the last few yards of the trestle and stamped moccasined feet on solid ground. The Indian, frightened as he plainly was, stalked stolidly on to her side. "Nothing the white man can do," he seemed to say, "will flurry me."

Torrance met them with extended hand.

"I hope my little conversation with my daughter didn't raise false hopes, Big Chief. I haven't a drop that's fit to swallow."

The Indians stared at the extended hand in silence.

"I don't know whether they shake hands in your language," explained Torrance, "but it's all the rage with us. I'm straining to show how pleased I am. Ah—how's all the little papooses? Has the hired girl kicked for another afternoon a week, and who's the latest married man to run away with another woman? That may not be wigwam gossip, but it's all we know in our set; it's all the small-talk I have."

The Indian solemnly accepted the proffered hand, studying it curiously as his own brown one shook to Torrance's welcome.

"Me spik English," he grunted.

Torrance grinned foolishly. "Good—Lord!"

"Me spik English, too," murmured the squaw sweetly.

"Well, I'm bunco'ed!" Torrance rolled his eyes helplessly. "Take a hand, Tressa. Fancy meeting a family of redskins a thousand miles from nowhere and asking what make o' car they use!"

"Both spik English," said the Indian without a smile.

Torrance groaned. "Can you smile in English? This is getting on my nerves."

The Indians looked at each other, and as if one spring worked the mechanism their faces relaxed.

"Look at that, Adrian. That's prairie manners for you. I suppose if I asked him to jump off the trestle—"

The Indian shifted about and gravely regarded the long drop. Torrance clutched his arm and led toward the shack.

"Don't you do it, Chief. I ain't worth it."

He brought chairs from the sitting room.

"I don't even know whether you sit down. I haven't a pipe that would go round, but there's a fair tobacco you're welcome to. It don't make bad chewing. Tressa's awful glad to see you. We haven't had a caller since the new curtains went up."

The Indian was not listening; his eyes were on the two horses tied beyond the door. Gathering his blanket about him, he went to them, running a hand over them with the air of a connoisseur. He stooped to their feet, his two braids, twined through and through with bits of coloured cloth, falling over his ears.

"Good!" he grunted.

"Just what I said," agreed Torrance amiably, "—of course, after I'd paid for them. Best bits o' horseflesh this side of anywhere. Broke 'em myself, so I ought to know."

"Daddy!"

"Maybe not quite broke 'em," corrected Torrance easily, "but they nearly broke me. Picked 'em from a bunch of the finest animals ever came off a ranch—"

"Daddy!"

"That *was* a fine lot, Tressa—and those two were the best of the bunch."

"How much?" The Indian's face was expressionless.

The contractor blinked. "You don't want to buy? I thought Indians always stole what— The worst of me is I talk too fast. You see I lost a lot of horses not long ago, and it's temporarily affected my judgment. I don't say it was Indians stole 'em—in fact I saw the guy, but it was too far to catch his pedigree. Anyway, he was dressed white. One of three got 'em—either my own men, or contractors out west, or the Indians. If I thought it was my men there'd be a new line of graves to-morrow—and I don't somehow think the contractors would risk it. It seemed safer to blame the Indians then. Now? Oh, I guess I must have been crazy. Them horses weren't stolen. They've taken a holiday to get a drink, or gone for the World's Series baseball games."

"How much?" repeated the Indian stoically.

"But you don't want horses like them, when you've a circus beast over there would make them look like a wheelbarrow without the wheel."

"How much?"

Torrance sighed. "Is that all the English teacher knew at your school? Conrad, he's making me name

a price, because I don't know any other way to stop him. Indian-who-spiks-English, they cost me two hundred dollars each, and—"

"Daddy!"

"Oh, bother!" Torrance mopped his forehead. "That's the worst of bringing up a daughter too strict. A real liar hasn't half a chance. Did I say fifty dollars?"

"Fifty dollars," offered the Indian, unfolding a wallet from his blanket.

"One hundred dollars—in cold cash—out here in the bush! Say"—he walked reverently round the Indian, looking him over—"where d'you keep his scalp? I warn you I haven't ten dollars in the shack—and I'm getting bald about the crown."

"Fifty dollars!" grunted the Indian.

"I got to turn it down, old friend. They're the only saddle horses, bar the Police, within a week's journey."

"One hundred dollars."

Torrance walked reverently over to the horses and stared at them.

"I bet they're a damn sight better'n I thought."

"Two hundred each!" There was a finality about the extravagant offer that impressed Torrance.

"Big Chief," he murmured, "let's see that bank again. To tell you the truth, I paid exactly ten dollars each for them—and I couldn't rob a decent citizen. So you see the deal's off: I wouldn't take the money, and you couldn't go back on your offer."

The Indian was holding out a huge roll of bills. Torrance blinked at it and turned to Tressa.

"You can't sell, daddy. One is mine, and I'm learning to ride. But we'll give them the horses for nothing when we leave."

Torrance extended his hands helplessly. "That ends it, you see. She's boss. We can't sell, but we'll hand 'em over f.o.b. when we go—and if you've oats enough in your tribe for that red fellow I wish you'd give me your address and let me know when nobody's home."

The eyes of the Indian and his squaw met. The latter sighed. The Indian slowly thrust the wallet within his blanket. Then without another word he took her hand and they started back across the trestle.

Torrance watched them with amazement. "Hi—say!"

The Indians stalked on.

"I might be able to scare up a bottle of fire-water—"

No response. Torrance sank into a chair and drew his sleeve across his forehead.

"Talkative? By hickory, they reek with it. They sure got my goat. All the squaws I ever saw before were so thick with grease, and the things that stick to it. . . . I'm beginning to feel for the squaw-man after seeing that girl."

"Wasn't she pretty?" Tressa was staring regretfully after the receding couple. "I didn't know they were so dainty—"

"Wasn't I telling you they aren't—"

Conrad spoke for the first time: "I've seen that chap before."

"Me, too," said Torrance. "But I can't imagine not picking him out of any Indians I ever met. They don't grow 'em like him. Our fire-water, with here and there a missionary for good measure, sees to that. Oh, hello, Sergeant!" Unheard, Sergeant Mahon had come along the soft grade and was watching the Indians now almost at the other end of the trestle. "You missed the fun. Highest velocity conversation on two words ever."

The Sergeant whipped out his binoculars. He did not move again until the Indians had galloped out of sight.

"What d'you make of 'em, Sergeant?"

"Strange!" muttered the Policeman, slowly replacing the glasses.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FIGHT IN THE SHACK

BIG Jim Torrance was thrilling with incipient twinges of a great triumph, though the superstitions of his kind struggled against their display. For two weeks his eager, hopeful eyes had been fixed on those twin lines of steel above the trestle, and not an atom of bend could he detect.

What if at last he had choked that insatiable maw on the river bottom! What if his great task was nearing its end!

A timetable, against his inclination, began to form in his mind. Another week of foraging for those omniverous jaws, of bolstering up the structure of the trestle. If by that time its appetite had not revived, only the new foundations and the light task of filling in. Perhaps then he would relieve himself of half his staff; he was suddenly aware of the strain of such a lawless crew. Unexpectedly and without precedent he found himself anticipating the six months' winter rest.

His excited joy had been assuming peculiar expression. Sitting down for more than a few minutes at a time became a strain. He insisted on helping Tressa with the housework, and his interest in the books they were reading was so perfunctory that Conrad and Tressa went on to the end without bothering about

his attention. Not infrequently he strolled down to the river bottom and paced up and down beneath the trestle. Again he would walk out on the sleepers above the quicksands and glory in the solidity beneath his feet.

One evening when Conrad had gone to the Police barracks to make a report on recent trifling but significant occurrences, and to complete plans for a more systematic protection of the trestle now that it was nearing completion, Torrance moved his chair to the open doorway and sat dreaming.

"You haven't locked the stable yet," Tressa reminded him, breaking a long silence.

He laughed recklessly. "What's the need? We'll be away in a month. Big Chief gets 'em then. Funny if they were stolen. You bet the Indian would find them."

"Don't be too sure of things, daddy. Adrian doesn't feel as comfortable as you do—or want to make yourself think you do."

He whirled about in his chair, scowling. "What do you mean—'make myself think I do'?"

She looked him steadily in the eye. "I don't believe you're as easy as you make out. The trees are thick ahead yet."

"It's you, saying things like that, makes me moody," he returned sulkily.

Tressa rose to find something in her room, and her father turned back to the out-of-doors with an impatient exclamation.

In reality he was no more easy about things than

Adrian. It was the gripping anxiety of it made him struggle to convince himself. But it was not the quicksands he feared, as Tressa supposed, but the bohunks. Things were going too smoothly in bulk—the disturbing incidents were so trifling and ineffectual. Accustomed to difficulties, the absence of friction since the tragedy of the falling log was oppressive to him. It was unnatural. Koppy was too tractable, the camp too peaceful. In the idleness of those days he had time to brood over that.

But he set his face stubbornly against the fears her words aroused. He could see the trestle sound and solid as a rock. The camp lay beneath him, as quiet as a country village. Only a week or two and everything would be settled. He scoffed at his fears. As he looked out over the tumble of log and canvas, he vowed that when it was all over he would provide a bang-up feed that would send the bohunks away with one pleasant memory at least. Murphy and his engine would scurry off to Saskatoon and fetch such grub as bohunk never before tasted. It would be a finale befitting—

And just then three men topped the grade a score of yards away.

Torrance's sky suddenly darkened—Lefty Werner, Chico Morani, and Heppel, Koppy's special cronies. But he hid his concern beneath a grunt.

He had no intention of making his grunt an invitation, but the three came on without pausing, and Werner greeted him with an embarrassed "good-evening, boss." Torrance rose and stepped back into

the sitting room. Some instinct made him wish to move things beyond the eyes of the camp. For a moment the men hesitated, then, pushed into the lead, Werner led the way inside.

"Now," snapped the contractor, "get it off your chests. Where's Satan himself—Koppy, I mean?"

The most intelligent of the visitors, the most capable of estimating the underlying significance of tone and inflection, was Lefty Werner. The other two, maintaining their usual expression of phlegmatic and stubborn sullenness, left the delivery of their message to him, the glibbest talker. And plainly he had taken a dislike to it. A wild and fleeting wish that civilisation were nearer, wherein to hide himself, struggled with a goading appreciation of the comforts in Torrance's shack; for Werner often of late was oppressed with the futility of his present sphere as malcontent.

His aberrant reflections were interrupted by Torrance's rising impatience.

"Here, Werner, what is it? Speak up!"

Werner removed his hat and twirled it in his hand. Twice he cleared his throat before he could bring himself to speak.

"We've been sent—sent by the general body of workmen—"

"The bohunks, you mean," drawled Torrance with deliberate insult. "Drop the gush, Lefty. What do you want? . . . And you won't get it."

Werner turned anxious eyes on his two stolid friends for moral support. He noted Morani's hand

slide to the waistband of his trousers, and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

"They appointed us to tell you—to tell you that the time has come"—he was stammering, his eyes fastened on the Italian's supple hand—"the time has come when we, the workers, have decided—have decided that—"

Torrance lounged round the corner of the table that separated them, but Werner had eyes only for Morani's hidden hand.

"—have decided that we must be freed from the yoke of bondage. We demand the right to control ourselves, under our own leaders—"

He saw the wall of the room rush toward him—felt it strike him dizzy; and he lay wondering what had happened. Gradually he became aware of a great tumult about him, and he knew he was vitally concerned. His idea of fighting happened to centre in a knuckle-duster with an ugly dagger on the end of it. He drew it mechanically before his scattered wits told him where to direct it.

The tumult increased. With the roar of a bull Torrance had turned his attention to the other two. But they had taken surprisingly swift measures for self-protection, and Torrance was momentarily baffled. Morani glided behind the table, and Heppel, roused to unheard-of activity, kicked a chair before the impending peril.

Torrance stumbled over the chair and crashed into the table, smashing it flat, fortunately carrying Morani down with it. He was on his feet before Heppel's

slow wits realised the opportunity. Always the contractor had handled these men with his big fists; other weapons only dignified their resistance. These two fists of his, these great muscles—they were made for a game like this.

From her room Tressa heard the entrance of the delegation but not their message. At the first blow she ran to the door and peeped through. Was it vengeance for the devastation her father had wrought in the big camp riot? But she had faith in him almost equal to his own, and she knew she would only be in the way out there. But as the fight progressed, Torrance's bull voice rising with the fury of the fray, she lifted a small automatic from a drawer and hastily examined it.

As she turned, her window was raised from the outside and some one leaped through. Instantly the pistol was covering the intruder.

"No shoot! Indian come to help."

"Father don't require it," she returned stiffly. And she did not lower the gun.

"I come by window," explained the Indian. "Camp watching. White girl stay here. Indian help—maybe kill."

A loud crash from the sitting room drove the blood from the girl's face.

"Go then—go!"

In the room beyond, Torrance was enjoying himself, though not without painful reminders that it was a real fight. Heppel had secured a table leg and

was wielding it as never sledge or axe. Werner, having recovered his senses, had joined Morani and was circling the room for a chance to strike at the boss's back, in the meantime throwing chairs, books, loose parts of the stove, anything that came to his hand. A flower pot on the elbow brought a howl from Torrance, and for a moment he pulled himself together.

Bringing himself up short in the centre of the room he started out relentlessly to corner Werner, ignoring the others. The threatened man fled shrieking before him.

"Knife him, Morani! For God's sake, give it to him on the head, Heppel!"

A bright line slid down the Italian's hand and flashed like a gleam of lightning. Torrance drew up with a shooting pain in his left arm. Heppel leaped in behind and swung the table leg with all his cruel strength.

Morani and Heppel saw a figure launch itself through the bedroom door. It swept them crashing together and shot them through the outer door before they could use their weapons. Werner leaped after them.

Torrance started to give chase, mouthing great curses. But a pair of arms encircled and held him as if he were a child. Shifting bloodshot eyes to the new foe, he looked into the face of the Indian.

"You damned redskin! You're at the bottom of this, eh?"

The Indian tightened his grip. "White man a fool.

Indian save him. You chase—whole camp come. Two no fight five hundred—almost killed once trying it. The girl in there.”

The last four words brought Torrance to his senses. He ceased to struggle. The Indian's hands fell away. Tressa lifted her father's left arm; blood was dripping from it.

“Sit still, daddy. Hold your arm like that till I get the water and bandages—there's still hot water, I think. It's only a scratch. Grip your arm there.”

Torrance, suddenly weak at the sight of his own blood, sank into a chair, staring at the stained sleeve.

“Say, Big Chief, you're a good sport. I guess you came in time— Say! Where's he gone?”

The window in Tressa's room rattled.

“By hickory! If that fellow don't owe me something I don't know about, he's running up a big bill against me.”

CHAPTER XV

KOPPY MAKES A THREAT

THOUGH he had emerged from a perilous situation with little damage, Torrance was nursing a keen sense of injury when Conrad returned from his visit to the Police and saw a light still burning in the shack. The foreman listened to the story with more concern than anger. The danger lay not in what the bohunks demanded—they could resist that—but in the insolent confidence that put the demand into words. Therein was displayed a disturbing sense of power, a reckless daring to strike the boss in his most sensitive convictions. It could only mean that they were prepared to bring matters to a head without loss of time.

And the trestle was just ready for the final touches!

That the incident increased the difficulties of his own position did not enter Conrad's head. Thoughtful eyes moving from father to daughter, his first words betrayed his main anxiety.

"Tressa can leave right away for the East."

Surprise and indignation were added to the cloud of fury that twisted Torrance's face; he was speechless. Tressa herself settled the question:

"I'm not going."

"Send her out of the country for a few filthy bohunks!" sputtered her father. He spat into the sawdust box and crammed a charge of tobacco into

his pipe with his uninjured hand, though the pain of holding the pipe in his left hand made him wince. "I won't recognise them by so much as a wink. They have my answer, and I imagine it was a bit convincing—"

"The Indian can't always be on hand," said Conrad stubbornly.

Torrance screwed up his eyes.

"He's getting the habit of popping up unexpectedly. I wonder what's the game. I thought I was strong, but that chap could whistle 'God Save the King' and truss me up like a partridge at the same time. His arms felt like them two trees that fell on me down Thunder Bay way. I'd hate to have him on the other side in a fight."

The practical Conrad brought him back to the point.

"And now what?"

Torrance considered a moment.

"First we'll tell the Police. I was going to fire them off the bat, but I'm too mad for that. I want to see them get a couple of years in jail. I want the law to take a hand now; I've taught them *my* law."

"What can the law do to them?"

The contractor eyed his foreman belligerently.

"What can it do? Don't you think coming up here and trying to rough-house me is worth a year or two? Say, you don't think it was a slapping match, or a pink tea sociable! Take a look about the room." The sarcasm of it was pleasing to his jangling nerves. "If you don't guess right the first time, take another.

If you're off the track then, I'll get a doctor for you—or show you this arm of mine."

"Who started it?"

Torrance leaned forward and searched Conrad's face as if he considered him demented.

"O' course," he sneered, "you'd go into court and swear I went on the rampage and cornered them. You'd say I caught 'em at their evening devotions and smashed their crucifixes over their heads and tackled 'em with a cutlass in my teeth and two revolvers—"

"You might have a little on Morani for using a knife," Conrad agreed calmly, "but you'd have trouble finding a lawyer to take such a case. They made a request, without violence—"

"Yah, they knelt down on their marrow-bones and begged His Highness to grant them the small boon of letting them put their feet on his neck. They humbly petitioned me to kick over the trestle, pay them ten dollars a day, raise the allowance of pie, and then give them certificates of character. You'd have done it, I suppose. Only that isn't the way I've made a success of railway construction, my lad."

Conrad took it cheerfully. "Then imagine you take it to court. Have you time? It'll mean Battleford for the Police trial. And what would you win? They don't jail men even out here for defending themselves. And what would happen the trestle in the meantime?" He saw hesitation in Torrance's eyes. "Besides, I'd hate to be called to prove the

sweetness of your temper and your unprovocative ways."

Torrance took it out on his pipe for three minutes.

"Then off you make for the camp," he decided, "and fire them. Don't let 'em even spend the night here. If I set eyes on one of them again there'll be murder; I won't be responsible for myself if that cur Werner's smirking physog gets in front of me; and I'll punch Morani on sight, just for safety-first."

Conrad rose and went to the door, where he stood in silence a long time looking through the darkness to the camp lights.

"I'm thinking of the work," he said gravely.

"Oh!" snapped Torrance. "I'm not, of course!"

"Sometimes I question it. Werner and Morani and Heppel were sent by the bohunks. With Koppy they have the whole bunch in the hollow of their hands. We couldn't face a strike at this time of the year; we'd never get another crew now till next spring—and you couldn't stand that. . . . Don't imagine you've cowed them through their delegation. I'm willing to wager the camp never hears of the fight; it might disillusion them of a fancied power. Koppy knows better than to let them know they're licked."

"I said to fire them." Torrance spoke so calmly that Conrad searched his eyes with unaccustomed concern. Yet the foreman did not falter.

"There are other things to consider—"

The contractor raised himself to his full height and frowned down on the smaller man. "You seem to

misunderstand your position, Adrian Conrad. What did I hire you for?"

"For quarter what I'm worth," replied Conrad caustically.

Torrance blinked twice, then, coldly:

"From the first of this month your pay will be four hundred a month. Now do what you're told—or your pay stops instanter."

"Then I'll have to work for nothing," said Conrad serenely. "I'm not working for you—or you'd have been paying me four hundred for the last two years, and some one else to look after me." He examined the contractor up and down with frank disgust. "I don't know how any daughter of yours keeps me here."

Tressa came to them then and seized a hand of each. They made a pretty picture in the lighted doorway—the big, frowning father in the rear, the smaller foreman with one foot on the step, and between them this sweet girl whose whole horizon was bounded by them, holding a hand of each, now dimpling, now pouting, always pleading and certain of herself.

Down in the camp the peace of night had fallen. Weary and gorged, quieted by the evening's lounge and the music they loved, the crude off-scourings of a dozen nations had retired to their bunks and were sleeping as peacefully as if their consciences were clean. Here and there a light twinkled, but as the three in the doorway looked, they blanked out one by one. The soundless night had closed in.

Torrance moved uncomfortably. He would have yielded to anything but disobedience, and a disobedience that entailed the retention of men who had made a ridiculous demand and then attacked him when he refused it. Would it look as if he feared to discipline, as if the flash of a knife could cow him? Anything rather than knuckle down to such creatures!

"May I speak to the boss?"

A familiar voice came out of the darkness not a yard from Conrad. They heard it with an inward start; the training of their lives had been never to exhibit alarm—it was one of the muscles whereby they controlled men like these.

"I hear what happen. I come for truth."

Torrance, at the first sound, had slipped the bandage and lowered his shirt sleeve, stained as it was. He brushed the other two aside and filled the doorway. A sudden disgust filled him lest the Pole should enter.

"You know the truth already, you skunk! You knew what would happen before it happened—or you thought you did. I guess I disappointed a few of you."

"I find Lefty with sore head and I ask why. I make them tell. My men tell when I command. He say—"

"I don't care a tinker's cuss what he say. It's what *I* say counts on this job."

"Did they hurt boss?" Koppy's voice was servilely anxious. "Lefty tell me Morani stab."

Torrance laughed contemptuously. He was stroking his moustache with the injured hand; now he threw both arms out and repeated the sneering laugh.

"Chico's knife is more dangerous to himself than to me." He turned back and picked up the stiletto from the table. "Here"—tossing it on the ground before the Pole—"tell him he dropped his needle in his hurry; and I guess he didn't want to come back for it. It's no use to me. Your five hundred Chicos, with all their knives and knuckle-dusters, can't come up here and give orders."

"I fire them to-night," promised Koppo.

"No, you won't." Torrance's mind was working with unusual celerity. "They got what was coming to them from my fists this time. Next time they'll need a doctor—or an undertaker. Besides, it's not your business to fire. That's all. Good-night."

"Ignace Koppowski hope young missus not frightened," came the voice from the darkness.

"Why should she be? There ain't enough men in the camp to hurt her. If you doubt it, refer to Werner and Morani."

Koppowski coughed. "Indian strong man. Indian save your life. Godd! But he hurt my men. Indian look out. They never forget. You tell him?"

"Tell him yourself," jerked the contractor. "And I'd like to be around when you're at it. I fancy he can look after himself."

"Indian need to," said Koppo from the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI

THE HEART OF A HALFBREED

BLUE PETE glided in and tossed aside the blanket of his Indian disguise with a gesture of irritability. With a petulant kick his beaded moccasins struck the ceiling of the cave, and, sighing, he sank his feet into the more familiar high-heeled cowboy boots.

Mira, moving busily about the camp stove in a recess, noted it all without turning her head—noted, too, that there the usual routine of his return was interrupted. The great two-inch spurs, his individual twist to cowboy attire—great spiked wheels which he never used, but whose glitter and rattle seemed to satisfy him—were forgotten. Instead, he sank to the rocky floor and meditatively drew from his belt the beloved corncob pipe.

Troubled, Mira went about the preparation of their evening meal with a plaintive quietness. Juno, too, seemed oppressed, for after a tentative wriggle of her stump of a tail she settled back on her haunches, eyes fixed on her mistress.

Mira struggled to hold back the tears, struggled harder to hide them when they persisted. To celebrate their return to the old cave under the river bank she had spent hours that afternoon scouring woods and river bottom for wild flowers; and a dozen old tin cans rescued from the camp garbage heap gleamed

confused colour in the candle light. For more hours she had been rasping her little hands with scrubbing the rude table and the blocks that served as seats; and over the table she had draped after much experiment a gaudy Indian blanket, thereby approaching more nearly the atmosphere of home they both craved so eagerly. About the wall depended picture papers, meaningless in story but heavy with pathetic longing.

Hitherto he had always noticed so quickly and eagerly her efforts toward their comfort. From the first it had been one of the rites of their association—he beaming wordlessly at the touches of decoration with which she busied herself about their wild homes, she glowing with vocal pleasure at the things he carved with his own hands—the chair back in the Cypress Hills cave, the shelves for her stores, the drawer in the table, the box for Juno to sleep in.

And now he did not seem to notice—and she had worked so hard.

Presently the odour of the cooking venison beat its way to his brain and he lifted his head from his chest. He saw then the flowers in the old tomato and butter tins, the Indian blanket hanging from the table, the fresh spruce boughs of their bed; and his neglect was to him akin to sacrilege. Rising, he made for the door and the darkness beyond.

Without turning she saw him leave, and in part she understood.

He was suffering—Blue Pete was suffering these days in mind as never in body. The accumulation of the intense longings since she had been torn from him

down in the Hills to serve her sentence for rustling was struggling with other hopes and fears; and the fight was rending. Until only a few days ago he had been heading with certain and speedy success for the day when Mira might return with head held high to the 3-bar-Y, her own ranch. Only his guilt intervened, for she had already paid the penalty of her own rustling. It was the knowledge that she would never return without him that made the aim such a sacred one. To free her he must clear himself with the Police. And that could be only when every horse with whose stealing he had been connected was returned to its rightful owner. In his simplicity he imagined the law would be satisfied then.

So near had been the attainment of his one great ambition that his head sometimes whirled. Only two horses yet to recover! Then so many things had happened.

Throughout his engagement as a common bohunk Blue Pete had been happily unconscious of the embarrassing forces working subtly within him to thrust to the background his own redemption. He only knew he was uncomfortable, that strange processes were cropping to the surface in his once firmly fixed mind. It seemed treason to Mira—Mira, for whom everything was done—to delay a task so simple.

Yet he could not take the last two horses that alone, he imagined, stood between him and freedom, and relieve himself of new responsibilities.

Doubly miserable, he sank on the needle-strewn sand and sighed.

"Pete!"

Mira's gentle voice came to him through the darkness, filled with trembling entreaty. Conscience-stricken, he hurried back to the cave. She met him at the edge of the candle light and took his hand.

"Can't you tell me about it, Pete?"

With angry self-accusation he replied: "I cud 'a' got the horses, Mira, an'—an' we'd 'a' bin back in the Hills long before this. Thar was jes' a padlock to smash . . . an' I didn't smash it."

She smiled sadly and wound a small arm about his neck.

"I know," she whispered. "We can't help it. . . . There are so many reasons why we can't go yet."

She turned swiftly away to the stove that he might not see how it tore her. Never in his gloomiest suffering had Blue Pete longed as she had for a home. For he had never known home as she had. Her efforts to brighten up their days were the expression of a desire to plant in his inexperienced mind the picture of home that kept passing before her eyes. Her nights were but one long dream of a fireside, with Blue Pete in the other chair. And as the time of their penance seemed to be nearing an end the ugly ranch-house at the 3-bar-Y became to her a palace. Over and over again she planned the fresh home they would start—every chair and table and picture and rug had a place. Helen Mahon, the Sergeant's wife—her own educated cousin—would help her, would supply the art Mira herself, in her prairie upbringing, only groped for. She would make of the 3-bar-Y a home for the whole

Cypress Hills district. Every day of delay was agony.

Yet she spoke cheerfully. "It wouldn't be just—just right to go till the trestle's done, Pete, dear."

He looked at her sharply. It was the conviction he had been fighting many a day—that it seemed to be only his own had made it so much harder for him. From the silence he had forced on himself of late he spoke fiercely:

"That damned Pole! We can't let him win. We got to lick them bohunks."

"And Mr. Torrance—after all, Pete, he's only a tenderfoot. . . . Then there's Tressa."

He nodded slowly. "Yes, there's Tressa." A chivalry he would never have acknowledged had been thrusting the girl more and more into the foreground. From the ordinary perils of isolation father and lover might defend her, but in the great calamity that Blue Pete knew was planned to overwhelm her two protectors she would inevitably fall.

"But yuh shudn't have to wait, Mira," he burst out. "An yuh wudn't," he added miserably, "if I wasn't jes' a common rustler."

She came to him with quick steps and ran her fingers through his coarse hair.

"I wasn't no better, Pete—me and my brothers." In her emotion she had dropped back into the old looseness of speech.

He seized her hand in both his own and crushed it to his lips so that it hurt pleasurably.

"I know why yuh stole them horses," he murmured.

"Yuh cudn't bear to see the Sergeant thinkin' he loved yuh—an' yuh knew he cudn't love a rustler."

"I guess I knew I was going to love you, Pete."

He wrapped his arms about her and buried his face in her neck; and she could feel him trembling.

Presently she spoke again softly:

"And there's the Sergeant."

"God help me!" he groaned. "I think that's what's holdin' me."

From the moment of his leap through Torrance's window the halfbreed's mind had been disquieted. At any risk, until he could go to them with clean hands, he would not let the Police know he was still alive. He knew their relentlessness in the chase; and he must be free in order to redeem himself.

That very night, straight from eaves-dropping at the bohunks' meeting, he had crept back to Torrance's stable and found it locked. The padlock in itself was nothing, but it implied suspicion—possibly entangling precautions. And so he had slunk away.

A night's reflection had warned him how fortunate was the instinct that held his hand. As Mira lay sleeping heavily beside him on their bed of spruce, he had lived again the happy days of his unofficial Police duties with Sergeant Mahon—on the prairie, at the barracks and the Police post, but more vividly than all, in the fastnesses of the Cypress Hills. He saw once more the kindly eye, felt the friendly hand, heard the soft voice of the one man above his class who had treated him as equal and friend. He saw again the

old tobacco pouch spilled on Inspector Barker's desk in the barracks at Medicine Hat.

He knew why Mahon had come north.

"I can't see him fail, Mira," he groaned. "He's did fer if he does. We got to stay an' see him through."

"Perhaps he's after the horse-thief too."

Blue Pete started. Then his head sank in one arm. "We can't help him thar, Mira. We can't be caught—yet. . . . An' the Sergeant wudn't want to get us—yet."

"It'll be all over soon, Pete," she said more brightly. "Mr. Torrance has promised us the horses when he goes."

"God fergive me fer keepin' yuh waitin', Mira!" he breathed, trying to read in her face the forgiveness that meant more to him.

But she had turned away, and he did not see the tear on her lashes.

CHAPTER XVII

A PLOT DEFEATED

TORRANCE'S pride was becoming a devastating thing; for the moment it had run away with his sense of proportion and obliterated every superstition. As he ran his eye expertly along the level of the steel rails and saw that the trestle did not sink so much as a hair's breadth, he wanted to shout it to the world. Had he not, at unguarded moments, been held down by momentary flashes of the old dreads he would have jumped on his little speeder and chugged away to the west to sing his satisfaction to the hundred and one contractors who were looking for him to open the way to their longest and heaviest trains of supplies, growing longer and heavier as grade crept into the mountains. He wanted to cry to them: "Run your trains—fifty cars at a time, if the rest of the line will bear 'em. As for the Tepee trestle, it's as steady as the mountains—and a blame sight bigger job."

He longed to talk it over with those who had intelligence to size up the task; he wanted to read its due in the great newspapers of the East.

"Some little jerk-water builder puts up a six-penny cement culvert down East and gets half a column. There ain't enough newspapers in the East to do justice to my trestle."

He was as frank in his self-appreciation as in his passions. Now, so far as Big Jim Torrance was concerned, there was not an obstacle in the line from Montreal to the Pacific. And he, Big Jim Torrance, had made the transcontinental possible where others had failed.

It irritated him that his audience was so small. Tressa's confidence was no new thing; she had always believed in him—no more now than before. Conrad still clung to his megrims—phantom fears that had all but faded from Torrance's mind. As for the five hundred brainless creatures to whom his great victory should be a matter of personal pride, it meant no more to them than last year's flowers.

And so Torrance, waving a boisterous hand from the low seat of his speeder to the young pair standing on the steps of the shack, threw open the gas and throbbed down the track to the end-of-steel village to add to his audience two Policemen and a train crew who were already crowing in anticipation of the end.

Adrian Conrad and Tressa saw him go without a worry in the world but that he would return too soon. Where only the three of them lived it was almost impossible for the two lovers to creep away by themselves. Even a sympathetic daddy becomes a burden in the springtime of youth.

As the older man vanished in a whirl of dust from the loose grade, Conrad puffed a long breath, turned to look deep into the girl's eyes, and without a word held out his hand. She took it, and they ran like children across the grade and into the forest.

Not by favour but by a brain to plan and a never-ceasing vigilance did Ignace Koppowski hold the position of local president of the outlaw organisation. His spies were everywhere—or everywhere that mattered, he thought. And spies spied on other spies; that was the vertebrae of the system on which the I.W.W. thrived.

With his own eyes he saw Torrance mount the speeder and drive away; and with a scowl he followed the laughing flight of the girl and her lover.

At last the trestle was unguarded!

A few hasty words to Heppel started him at a lumbering trot for the camp. Ten minutes later a score of men stood within their leader's shack.

Koppy knew he had time. The boss was gone for the evening; and he knew something of lovers' rambles. One gang he despatched into the forest after Tressa and Conrad. A second crawled in detachments through the woods to the powder cache near Conrad's shack. Heppel had charge of the first, Werner of the other. Werner, given his orders, demurred.

"Thanks, Koppy, but I don't think it's a thing I couldn't do without."

"Five men will do," said Koppy.

"Five men's six too many," grumbled Werner. "Why d'you pick yours truly for all the soft jobs?"

"You are honoured. Only three of you—"

"I'll give up my share of the honour to Morani's; he's fair bubbling for a chance to wipe out the miss he made with his dirk the other night. I'm not a bit re-

sentful. I don't care if I never see the boss again. I resign in favour of Chico."

"I need Morani."

"Not half as bad as I do, pompous one. Look here, old chap, this is a big job, ain't it, a real big thing?"

"Perhaps the end of everything," agreed the underforeman solemnly.

"That's why I'm not hankering for it," said Werner under his breath. "And the fellow who carries it through is going to wear a bigger jewel in his crown, so to speak?" he asked aloud.

Koppy glowered.

"Then why not cop it yourself, old man? My crown's getting a bit top-heavy already. You got a finer sense of balance, and your neck's stronger. Them bolts I drew on the trestle pretty near gave me a headache—not to say as near as you came to it when the boss got swinging," he added with a leer. "Hugo Werner never was ambitious."

Koppy raised himself haughtily. "I order," he rapped.

"Too darn much for my skin," grumbled Werner. "It's a bad habit to get into—for the other fellow."

But he set about obeying, for therein lay the choice of two evils. Five experienced "rock-hogs" were put in his care, men with so little reverence for dynamite that they chewed the sticks, from bravado at first, later as a horrible habit.

"They're all away," Werner assured them, "and the girl. Puff!—and it's all over."

He ran up the slope to the grade and danced in the

open door of the boss's shack; and, grinning at the convincing devil of it, they set about their task. Armed with fuse and dynamite they crept along underneath the bank toward the trestle. Werner, as an excuse to linger, carried the fuse; he almost envied the bo-hunk in the rear with the dynamite. With quick hard blows the "rock-hogs" attacked one of the main central piers with hammer and chisel. They wanted to get it over; the job was too much exposed to suit them.

Almost at the first blow a rock tumbled from the top of the trestle at their backs, and immediately a shower of gravel beat on and about them. Promptly they ran, Werner leading all the way.

From within his shack Koppy witnessed the foiling of his plans. Mouthing deep maledictions, he saw the Indian dance a few steps on the trestle, shouting derision at his fleeing followers. And presently the red-skin clambered down through the network of the trestle and picked up fuse, dynamite and tools, to carry them stolidly up the slope past Conrad's shack to the grade. Then in full view of the camp he seated himself on the grade, rifle across his knee, and began to whittle.

There Torrance, chugging noisily up from his evening dissipation at the end-of-steel village, found him. Even at a distance the absence of life about the shack struck the contractor, and the last half mile he covered with everything open. With the brakes still screeching, he tumbled off and ran to the door, calling to Tressa. The Indian slipped through behind him.

"Girl no here."

Torrance whirled, every nerve tingling, fresh fears tumbling through his brain.

"Out in woods with young brave," continued the Indian, shrugging. "No watch time."

The contractor struck a match and lit the lamp. The Indian closed the door and came close to him. In one hand he held several drills and hammers, in the other a length of fuse and two sticks of dynamite. Torrance's eyes protruded. He looked from the Indian's tell-tale hands to his stolid face.

"They drew them away and—and tried to blow up the trestle?" Self-contempt for the evening's noisy pride swept over Torrance. Then the trestle faded completely from his mind. Tressa—where was she?

"Stay here," he ordered, rushing to the door. "I'll bring the Police."

Like a toy he lifted the speeder about, and with a heave of powerful legs sent it away to a flying start.

But Torrance's reaction had carried him too far—just too far. Tressa was safe. Heppel and eight cruel companions, as directed by Koppy, had gone on the trail of the two lovers. But when it came the moment to strike, Adrian Conrad was their master. In the darkness they slunk away. And the two lovers, arms entwined, scarcely knew that darkness was falling.

In the shack the Indian listened to the fading exhaust of the speeder. His eyes were roving about the room. He was smiling. For the second time in a year he was within the walls of a home; for the first time free to look about. A curious pathetic longing twisted his face. He began to tip-toe about the room, laying

a reverent finger everywhere. The covers of the coloured magazines he lifted and let fall, pressed the gaudy cushions that strewed the couch, touched the cheap ornaments Tressa had woven into the picture with happy hand, stared into the home-framed pictures. Over the vase of wild flowers he stooped with a reminiscent smile; and thoughtfully for several minutes he rocked Tressa's own chair.

"Mira shud have 'em all. . . . An' she's got nothin' but a hole in the ground with a halfbreed. . . . An' yet I ain't done nothin' . . . nothin'!"

Absorbed as he was in his dreams, he did not forget the open doorway with its view from the distant camp. Stooping beyond its range, he pushed through to the kitchen. It was pitch dark there, yet his eyes seemed to take in everything. A distant sound from far down the track sent him running to the stable door. It was locked. Inside he could hear the quiet munching of the two horses. His powerful fingers closed over the padlock. A mere twist and nothing lay between Mira and the home that should be hers. The chug of the returning speeder roared nearer.

Blue Pete put a hand to his head and turned away.

Up through the night came the beating car, everything wide open, and stopped before the door. Into the shaft of light from the open doorway Torrance and Sergeant Mahon ran.

"Chief, Chief, where are you?"

From out over the trestle a voice replied.

"Indian gone."

Torrance dashed out on the grade and tried in vain

to pierce the darkness. "Here—here, you blithering idiot! The police want you."

No reply—not even a sound.

"You smug-faced redskin! I wonder how much you're mixed in this."

"Indian no come more." The voice drifted from far away in the darkness on the trestle.

Sergeant Mahon lifted his head like a hound on the scent, then with a perplexed smile re-entered the shack.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CONSCIENCE OF A BOHUNK

TRESSA TORRANCE'S outlook on life was a comfortable one, born of her own sunny nature. Its foundation was love, the keystone of its arch peace. The blood of a gentle mother had effectually subdued in her the fierce impetuosity of her father—as in life the frail little wife had dominated the boisterous husband. Tressa wanted most to be loved. It was food to her self-respect, to her easy and appealing ways, even to the laugh bubbling so readily to her rosy lips. Most of all she wanted to be loved by Adrian Conrad; her father—well, his love was impervious to influence.

In her gentle love of peace the bickerings that surrounded her made her shrink within herself, wondering, staunch in her faith that her daddy and Adrian were right—without these blundering, uneducated foreigners being quite as bad as their masters thought.

Desiring to escape it all for a time, she crept away one late afternoon when Adrian and her father were in conference with the two Policemen. They did not seem to notice. Less than a week ahead was the commencement of the last operation on the trestle before handing over to the big contractors complete; and the anxiety of the moment spoke in the firmness of their tone and the grimness of their measures. Tressa stole away, troubled at heart.

In her favourite retreat, a cluster of slender birch trees deep in the forest, she seated herself on a fallen trunk and unrolled her crocheting. Through the thin foliage the sun filtered over her hair and spangled the ground at her feet. A breeze as gentle as herself whispered above her head in friendly commune with the great rustle of the forest. Secluded without being closed in from the light, she felt that she might untangle there more clearly the trifling problems of her sheltered life.

As she worked she hummed. Into the network of woven threads she was weaving the future—a month hence—a year—two years—five. And the pictures pleased her progressively. Adrian, laughing into her eyes after the season's hard struggle, was at her side . . . a happy husband then . . . a beaming and foolishly proud father; and little tots with their father's fair hair—

Something—more a feeling than a sound—arrested her. She flushed at the thought that some one was looking at the pictures of her imagination. Abashed, perhaps a trifle annoyed, but without a thought of fear, she lifted her eyes. But when she beheld Koppy, hat in hand, standing at the edge of her retreat with head bowed, his humility seemed to call only for the sympathy always denied him. With maidenly modesty she gathered her work to tighter compass, but no other restraint did she feel in the presence of the man her friends accused of unthinkable crimes. The inheritance of her femininity assured her that she was in no danger. Koppy had always liked her—she knew that also

by virtue of that inheritance; and every woman loves the strong thing that bends to her—loves, but perhaps does not respect.

Unconscious of the challenging coyness of words and manner, she spoke:

“You didn’t frighten me a bit, Koppy.”

“I didn’t want to,” he replied in a low voice.

“I don’t think I heard you. I guess I must have—felt you.”

He moved swiftly in among the trees and stood before her, soiled hat turning in grimy hands.

“You—felt me?”

A vague and sudden sense of discomfort made her raise puzzled eyes to his, but she dismissed it firmly as born of her father’s suspicions. Still she wished he would not stand so close, stooping over her, with that funny look in his eyes. Suggestively she glanced at the white trunk on which she was seated, and moved further along.

“I suppose it’s an instinct,” she said. “Animals must feel like that about things they can’t see or hear. Haven’t you often been conscious of being watched when you couldn’t see the watcher?”

He smiled from a world of superior knowledge; the unseen watcher was the foundation of the big game he was ever playing. The smile ended in a short laugh, and somehow it startled her—she seemed so naked in thought before this strange foreigner.

“You know what I mean,” she went on lamely. “I suppose a gopher peering from its hole in the ground would disturb me sooner or later.”

"Don't explain," he almost pleaded, "don't try to explain." He seated himself far up the trunk.

Again her puzzled eyes were on him. In some indefinite way he was so different, so—so human and equal. Outwardly there was no evidence of the change—the same nondescript clothes, the same grimy hands and face, the same coarse boots and clumsiness.

He seemed to read her thoughts, for with a gesture of long-suppressed protest he threw out his hands.

"Yes," he cried, "they're gnarled and dirty, and these old overalls are the mark of my degradation." He flung his hat passionately on the ground. "But I'm not always this way. Back in Chicago I dress—sometimes. There I'm what I like to be, what I can be. Not often—it is not that way I rule."

Her eyes were wide with surprise. "You—you speak—"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I speak English as well as you or any one else. I think in English. But it pays me to look foreign, to fight outwardly the 'civilising' influences of the country of my adoption." A slight sneer twisted his lips. "I must look like a cut-throat, because in that way I've reached the height I've attained in my organisation. It shocks you, because you don't understand, because you've never had to plough the row I've toiled along. . . . I'm not as bad as I seem."

She picked up her work to cover the beating of her heart.

"If you're out of sympathy—"

"But I'm not out of sympathy," he interrupted

earnestly. "I'm a Worker of the World, and always will be. I would prefer not to have to dress like this, but not because I deplore our aims. It is the misfortune of the class of men for whom I fight. Miss Torrance"—he slid abruptly down the trunk and leaned forward to look in her eyes—"I'm talking to you as I never talked before, as I scarcely dared to think. Any one else would hand me over to the Police. You won't. And to talk like this to a fellow-worker would mean a knife slid in here. No, you won't tell. I've known a lot of women, most of them bad ones because that's the only kind I have a chance to meet, but I never knew one to sell a man she did not hate . . . and a woman never hates till she first loves. You've never loved more than one."

"And not likely to," she put in quietly, even as she thrilled to the completeness of his trust.

He laughed harshly. "They all say that—that is, all but the kind any man can buy. But you know nothing of them—forgive me for mentioning them. . . . There aren't many women stick to their first love."

"Oh?" she said indifferently. "I haven't thought it worth discussing."

"No? Perhaps you're right. Many a time I've thought the same of woman, all women—until I learned that every woman, good or bad, is worth it."

His eyes had gone to the tree tops; they returned now so suddenly that she started. A curious smile moved his lips. .

"Do you know, you've disturbed all my convictions of women? I really know so little of you that it may

be foolish, but you've made me feel that woman in the singular may be so much more to a man than the whole mass of the sex. For you, or one of the very few like you, a man might give up every other ambition without regret . . . and I've had many—women and ambitions—in my day."

She was flushing, though she knew from the utter frankness of it that he was not making love, not even being impertinent. She had no fear of him, only of her inexperience in handling so strange a situation.

"You make a man feel there is everything in tossing aside all I've attained, merely to settle down as a respectable citizen." He was staring through the tree-tops again, hands clasped over one knee. "I could make a way for myself, a good way, without all this fever, with a woman like you to hold me straight. I know what I can do." A forlorn smile wrinkled his face not unpleasantly. "But there are two insuperable obstacles. The Workers wouldn't let me—and the woman wouldn't have me. . . . That's why I grow desperate sometimes, why I—"

She questioned with her eyes his continued silence. "I won't tell," she promised gently, "but perhaps you'd better say no more."

He did not seem to hear her, and she was cudgelling her inexperience for some smooth retreat, when he broke out explosively:

"I'm the product of over-sudden civilisation, like a thin-blooded man plunging into cold water. From the crude half-lights of my own country I leaped at one bound into the brilliance of civilisation's beam, as it is

found in America. And I couldn't stand it—few of us can. We get numb to everything but our own discomfort. And knowing we're bound for life, we struggle and beat our wings against things as we find them, in a panic because they differ so from things we were born to. We're like a bird in a room. It may be a cosy, warm and friendly room, but the bird wants only to get out in the cold. . . . The human tide we're plunged in from the very first day ignores us, or tramples us, or drives us like cattle, forgetting that we are numb and bewildered, panic stricken, unable to think beyond primal emotions. . . .

"If we could only have a year's apprenticeship where sympathy holds our hands! If only we could enter the new state by a gradient instead of a plunge! But there is no isle between, no one to lead us gently to the light. . . . And few of us would pause to be led. And so we struggle, and in the struggling hurt ourselves or are hurt. We strike out—and are struck back by stronger force than ourselves. And so we tumble back to sullen silence, watching and planning to beat that force as we may. . . . And there I am."

The hopelessness of his tone held appealing hands to her. She longed to help him, yet knew not how. And suddenly it came to her that perhaps it lay within her power to build up the structure of dissatisfaction that he was exposing to her.

"You know how foolish it is," she said. "You have intelligence, you see where fighting leads. Why strike back? Go with the tide; it is not trying to overwhelm

you, only to do you good. There'd be few knocks then."

"Ah," he cried bitterly, "but it's too late. The poison of resistance has flooded our veins, and as yet there is no antidote. Slowly it has been weaving itself into the very fibre of my character; I can't help it. At moments like this I see, for my mind still retains some of its sense of proportion . . . but part of the poison of it is that we do more with our hands, these hands you hate, than with our minds. Ten years it has been coursing through me. Can I alter my stature by a thought? As I talk to you I'm able to stand aside and watch the horrible thing, but gnawing always at me is the memory of those early days of panic."

She shook her head. "You'll never understand," she sighed. "I hoped you would."

"But I do understand. It's you can't, because you never stood on foreign shore—alone."

"Yet it is better than home, or you wouldn't come in your thousands."

"Better than home, yes, but worse than we hoped. Only those who flee the rude traditions, the heartless laws, the ignorance and comfortless life of worn-out Europe can see the pictures the very word 'America' rouses in us. I don't know whether it is not more the fault of our ignorance than of the boasts of those who have already gone, of those who would profit by our going, that we land with hopes nothing on earth could justify. And, not finding the milk and honey flow out to lave our ship, we start depressed and re-

sentful. We land in a strange country with only a word of its language. No one greets us, no one holds our fumbling hands. By dirty ways we slink to dirty tenement houses to hide ourselves—where disloyalty is the air we breath, discomfort our bed, and robbery our experience—robbed by the very friends who preceded us. Half-cowed, lonely, cursing in silence the drudgery that faces us, we learn to live for ourselves alone. Helpless, we drift into the hands of our own kind, who wax rich on the sale of us in herds to work no one else would undertake. Sullen, keen to the injustice of things, but ignorant of the simplicity of redress, we fall victims to our own morbid hatreds, to anything that promises to feed our fury. . . .

"That is where the Independent Workers of the World gets its recruits. And once its clutches close on us—" He stopped suddenly and clambered to his feet. "Miss Torrance, you'd better go home. You shouldn't come here. Go—right away!" His fists were clenched, his under lip gripped between his teeth.

She had dropped from her seat and was staring at him, alarmed at last. Over his face, into his very clothes and manner, had passed something that tumbled her rudely back to the Koppy she knew best, the malignant, sneering, mesmeric, uncouth underforeman her father and Adrian suspected. He stooped and lifted his hat jerkily.

"Workers strong," he said in his broken English. "They see big things, they do them. I, a vice-president—just a Pole, but big man—I order. Go home!"

Yet he turned his back before she did, and even as

she started away she knew he knew that he could not harm her. She ran as she had never run before, clutching her work in a grim little fist, not from fear of Koppy but of the strange thing she had seen.

Within sight of the grade she sank on the forest floor and lay looking up through tangled pictures, as through the woven ceiling of green leaves that sprinkled the sky. Then she sat up, smoothed her hair, wiped from her face every mark of agitation, and sauntered back to the shack.

"Where have you been?" Conrad called anxiously to her from the doorway. "We were calling you."

"Just getting away from you cold-blooded schemers," she laughed. "There's peace in the woods tonight, anyway." And she went past him to the kitchen to boil the kettle.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BEAT OF A MOUNTED POLICEMAN

SERGEANT MAHON was not happy in his new work. After a Police experience that knew only the ranching district he found the new conditions, the new crimes and criminals, irritating and a little bewildering. None of the trailing he loved, of horse and steer; no ranchers and cowboys and rustling gunmen any longer filled the horizon of his friendships and duties. He began to fear that a few months of it would wipe from his mind all he had ever learned. Even his horse was of little use, for the only path to ride, the three miles to the trestle, was quite as easy by foot or ballast train.

The limitations of his official horizon were stifling, a mere mile or two in radius. And within that circle were only a handful he could call friends, and a camp of bohunks. He hated the shadows of the forest, where life was scarcer than in the Hills, where even keen wits were wasted.

Here the guns of his former enemies were supplanted by knives and knuckle-dusters and clubs; and the men who wielded them were cowardly, slinking foreigners whose very appearance was repugnant. Sneaky, underground, despicable crime it was, running the gamut from petty annoyance to senseless murder. None of

the open-handed, bold and reasoned intelligence of the prairie criminal. It revolted him. Senseless, insensate, formless, erratic, it only disgusted him with its sheer and unprofitable lawlessness. On the prairie crime meant double duty for him—to discover, then to catch the criminal; here there was no escape—once the criminal was discovered.

This offscouring of Europe was little more individual to him than a Chinaman; Mahon was doubtful that he could pick out a second time more than a few of the bohunks. With faces dull and brainless, voices drab and lifeless, they merged into a mass of slime.

For the first time since he had donned the uniform Mahon began to question his capacity for it. Knowing the history of the wide effort demanded of the Mounted Police, he began to wonder if he could throw himself into it with credit to the Force.

The only attractive feature of his new life was the friendship of the bluff, cantankerous, but kind-hearted contractor, his sunny daughter, the manly foreman, and the talkative Murphy. Of Tressa he had so many glowing things to write in his letters to his wife that Helen threatened to rush north in self-defence. Thereupon he crammed one letter from start to finish with Tressa Torrance's praises, and defied Helen to fulfil her threat.

In the course of his work the solitary part that intrigued him was the mystery of the Indian. He felt that there was more there than he knew of; he had more than a suspicion that Torrance was concealing from him essential facts. But there seemed no call

for official action. Thus far the Indian was friendly; it was his nature to be silent and mysterious.

Failing use for his horse, Mahon spent much time in the forest. And after a time, the very shadows, and the secrecy breathed by the trees seemed to hint at revelations just round the corner. Down in the camp half a thousand bohunks, with brutal murder in their hearts, would, under Police eye, climb to their bunks as innocent in appearance as kittens. There in the woods, freed from observation, the bohunk was more apt to discard his mask of stupidity. Somewhere there his plans were laid, orders given and received.

What the Sergeant picked up little by little in the woods, small as it was and unsatisfying to his youthful impatience, sufficed to sustain his hopes. The constant meeting after work-hours with slinking bohunks who always avoided him, convinced him that something within the law was afoot, and repeated glimpses of distant groups which dribbled away when he came within sight induced him to alter his methods. More covertly he hunted, though it tried him sorely, and snatches of conversation untangled from the froth of their utterances did much to simplify his task and give more definition to his search.

Somehow his mind never quite freed itself of the haunting memory of his discoveries that early day down the slope of the river bank. Though the tracks were dim, he was satisfied that horses had passed that way at no distant date. Suspicious at first, doubtful as the marks advanced toward the river (largely on account of certain past memories roused by peculiar-

ities he seemed to recognise), he had later decided that what he saw was no figment of an imagination rendered more lively by the revival of the story of Blue Pete. Certainty was added by the suspicion that efforts had been made by a master-hand to hide the tracks.

Where that led he could not even guess, though at that stage his mind kept reverting to the Indian.

The mysterious arrivals and disappearances of the redskin as Torrance saw them was interesting enough, but they were as nothing to Mahon compared with his own failure to meet the Indian face to face. That was epitomised in the incident of the voice from the darkness over the trestle the night he rushed to Torrance's assistance. There was little to connect Torrance's inexplicable Indian friend with the Indian bohunk who had dived that first day over the cliff to almost certain death, but Mahon had been living among inferences and deductions and a certain question was arising in his mind. Still it pointed nowhere.

Constable Williams had told him of isolated bands of Indians who had visited the camps during the previous summer, and Mahon conceived the idea that with one of these braves Torrance had had dealings which placed the redskin under obligation though the contractor himself might not suspect it. An Indian never forgets; that was the simplest explanation.

The secrecy of the Indian's movements might be accounted for by a natural reserve, and specially by a shyness before the uniform. But where was he

hiding? That he was never far away was apparent. Mahon added to his other duties this new trail.

He realised the difficulty of his task after several distinct twinges of that strange sense developed in the wary at being under unseen eyes. It could not be a bohunk, for the workmen were not clever enough to trail him unseen. Also it was not an inimical inspection. Only the Indian could trail the trailer with such unerring confidence.

It was not unnatural, therefore, that as time went on the Indian assumed the proportions of a gripping mystery.

On the track of the new problem, Sergeant Mahon took to roaming the woods by night. His reward was unexpected and unsought—it had no connection whatever with the Indian. He discovered that the bohunks were meeting in their hundreds under cover of the darkness. To satisfy himself that an outside menace was not added to the perils surrounding the trestle, Mahon took to inspecting the camp from hiding whenever he came on one of these gatherings. The fact that they were composed of the ordinary bohunks of the camp, on some nights almost emptying it, relieved him.

He was turning his attention more directly to these meetings in the woods, when something happened to alter his plan.

CHAPTER XX

INDIAN OR POLICEMAN?

THE tang of the northern evening drifted through the open door of the shack, within which the contractor lounged in his big arm chair, smoking hard but thinking harder. Near the table, bending to let the full light from window and door fall on her work, Tressa stitched at a rip in a disreputable old vest of her father's.

The days were getting noticeably shorter, and the advance breath of the long, tight winter was beginning to add a new snap to the air. The noises of the camp drifted up over the grade fitfully, dreamily; some new hunger that might have been called homesickness was urging a new tone into the evening sounds.

Torrance, the stability of his work assured, imagined that he was supremely happy. But life had lost a fraction of its zip, though he refused to acknowledge it.

But Tressa knew it. Idleness was worse than medicine to her father, and for days he had been fuming with impatience for the opening of the last operation, more than a little irritable. She knew it as she watched the smoke breathe more slowly from his lips and the pipe grow cold. Presently, without opening his eyes, he dropped the pipe on the table and nestled his head against the cushion. Tressa smiled, for she

was happier than her father—and Adrian would be up shortly.

She heard the familiar whistle break out far down the sloping path beyond the grade. Higher and higher it mounted, and with hand held she listened with smiling eyes. She would keep on with her mending as if she had not heard; and the whistle would grow more impatient as it approached, calling her to reply.

Now he was half way up the slope—now only a few yards beyond the grade. She grabbed her mending and began to work industriously. Now he was on the grade—he would see her sitting there working as if she had forgotten there was an Adrian Conrad.

But just then the whistle ceased abruptly. That was not part of the formula, but she would not raise her eyes; he would break out in a moment more impatiently than ever, and she would look up as if she had just heard—

She looked up sooner than she reckoned, for the silence continued. Yet she anticipated only by a second Conrad's flying entrance, his face tense with a sudden alarm. Without a word he seized the rifle from its rack beside the door and dashed to the kitchen. Torrance blinked himself awake at the scurry.

“Wha-at-what—”

Conrad turned in the kitchen doorway and pressed finger to lip. They found him kneeling on the floor beside the kitchen window, the rifle pointing over the sill past the side of the stable.

Torrance, still blinking with sleep, looked along the

rifle barrel. For several seconds he could see nothing but the dead grey grass. Then a dim movement focussed his eyes. A hundred yards away the Indian was creeping toward them.

At intervals the redskin raised his head to peer across the grade. Not until he was close to the stable did he appear to notice the three watchers, then he lifted a hand and disappeared behind the stable. As he wormed his way to cover Torrance spoke eagerly.

"Let him have it, Adrian. I've always had my suspicions. It's some devilish trick or he wouldn't sneak up that way. Soon as he saw us he scrambled to cover. Watch for him around the other side."

But Conrad shook his head and pushed aside Torrance's extended hand; but he did not lower the rifle.

The Indian came round the other side of the stable, as Torrance had predicted, but there was no attempt at secrecy, except that he continued to hug the ground. Torrance grunted. Tressa sighed. Conrad lowered the rifle. The Indian crawled over the back step and lifted himself to his feet. Torrance forgot every suspicion before that smile.

"You got a nerve taking a chance like that, Big Chief. If I'd 'a' had the gun you'd 'a' got your blanket full."

The Indian looked significantly at Conrad and shrugged his shoulders. "Him no shoot Indian."

"You're too blamed sure," replied the contractor pettishly. "What's all the fuss about, anyway?"

"Bad paleface mebbe see." The Indian pointed toward the camp.

"Not likely! We could hardly see you ourselves. You better drop a postcard next time. I was just in the middle of a dream that the trestle was done and I was cashing the check in Winnipeg in thousand-dollar bills, after polishing off a few bohunks for a real bang-up finale. Then in booms Conrad here and grabs the rifle, and I wake up with the feeling them bohunks are doing the polishing on me. I was mighty near scared. By the way, we wanted you. The Police want you to identify the bohunks in that gang the other night that tried to blow up the trestle. If you'll come down to the camp with me and pick 'em out—"

"No good." The Indian shook his head. "You shoot. No save bridge that way. Others blow up. Job never done."

Torrance's admiration showed in his grin.

"That's thinking, Big Chief. Of course the Police don't give a cuss about the trestle, if they can get some one to hang." His face sobered. "Just the same, when this thing's off my hands and there's nothing to blow up but a pile of dirt, I'm going through the camp with an arsenal on me, and I'll splash blood over the ugly place till it looks like a Chicago beef-cannery. It would save transportation expenses, too. When the last shovel's dumped and the Police gone home to supper I'm going to boil over and roast a dozen bohunks alive—"

"Daddy!" chided Tressa. "He'll believe you."

"Think so?" asked Torrance delightedly. "Then here goes: Say, I'll eat my last breakfast of bohunk livers, seasoned with bohunk brains—if there are any

—and as an appetiser, bohunk tongues steeped in—”

“Heap big talk,” broke in the Indian wearily.

“And that,” snorted Torrance, “just about puts the blinkers on that. Even strangers don’t believe me. But you put before me bohunk hearts stuffed with bohunk sweetbreads—”

The Indian turned up his eyes in disgust. Torrance chuckled.

“He knows the belly-ache it would give a fellow, and I bet he’s et more men for breakfast than I ever dreamed of murdering. If your appetite’s up to it, Big Chief, take a mouthful of that thug living up on the bank above the camp. He’s got all the pizen of Russia in him, flavoured with the rankest sauces of Europe.”

The Indian waited.

“Shouldn’t wonder,” ventured the contractor, “if he’s got something in his system.”

“If you’ll let him get in a word edgeways,” laughed Tressa.

“That’s the way all yours get in,” grumbled her father.

“Bohunk have big plans,” grunted the Indian.

“We know that, but what’s eating us is what they are.”

“Indian find out.”

“Then you’ll do more than a squad of Police. But what’s the charge?” He eyed the Indian with suspicion. “They’re laying for you, you know.”

The Indian smiled scornfully.

“That shows you know the bohunk, friend. Be-

cause there's really no need to be afraid if they're afraid of you. It's the nature of the beasts. In three or four days I'll take the starch out of them by hard work, but in the meantime you can help us a lot—and earn enough cartwheels for yourself to keep you in fire-water the rest of your days. Look here”—he smiled magnanimously—“for every bohunk you give me an excuse to hang there's a dollar for you. That's five hundred dollars—and it's yours with my blessing.”

“Aren't you extravagant?” asked Tressa slyly.

He regarded his daughter with an injured expression. “You take all the pleasure from my bargains, Tressa. Make it three dollars a day, Big Chief. It sort of makes a man reckless to have his own detective force.”

The Indian waited patiently until the torrent of talk ceased.

“Indian take no pay,” he said stolidly.

The contractor rubbed his chin. “What's the big idea? That's plumb crazy—it ain't human nature. I had an Indian working for me once—and come to think of it, it didn't take us long to strike much the same bargain—and he was the best man I ever had working for me. If there's a tribe like you and him, I'll engage the whole caboose on the spot—at the same price. And I'll give you the sweetest job an Indian ever had since the North-West Rebellion. All you need do is surround that mess of huts down there, make a noise like an apple pie, and shoot everything that comes out to take a bite—that is, after the tres-

tle's done. If you can handle a spade and crowbar, and live on dessicated sawdust and tinned whale, you can take the shooting job on instanter. There's a good two weeks' work for you afterwards. Only start on Koppy. Eh, how's it look to you?"

"No pay Indian," repeated the Indian.

"There's a sting in the tail somewhere," Torrance muttered to his foreman. "Either he wants my calabash pipe, or he plans to land his whole family of papooses on my breakfast table while he's on the job. And their annual bath may be eleven months back. Go on, Chief, what's the answer?"

"Indian no work with P'lice."

"I don't ask you to—I don't want you to."

"Call off P'lice, then Indian find out everything."

"Mm-m! So that's the cue?" He turned his back to look meaningly at Conrad. "You want the Police called off, eh?"

"Indian no can work with P'lice."

The redskin went through exaggerated motions of peering about, his moccasins scraping noisily on the floor. Torrance began to understand.

"I see. The Police give the show away by snooping too much?"

"P'lice lookin'—bohunk good," grunted the Indian. "Nothin' doin'. Indian watchin'—bohunk not know."

"If I could I'd do what you want, but I'm not the Commissioner. Just the same, I'll put it to them. If they bother you, truss 'em up—only don't say I advised it, or leave me your widow to look after. By the way, where is she? Tressa wants to talk the latest

prairie styles with her, and how to cure freckles. But come on into the sitting room and be comfortable."

He started for the front room, pushing the others ahead of him. Turning at the door to throw another banter at his guest, he faced an empty kitchen.

"By gad! There he goes again!" He went into the sitting room and sat down with a loud sigh. "That fellow can't even leave like a civilised being, and he don't come like one. He gets on my nerves. I don't know whether it's best to go down with the trestle with a knife in my gizzard, or to die of that spooky feeling nobody's ever invented a patent medicine for since Peruna."

Sergeant Mahon heard the Indian's curious demand with a calmness that surprised even himself. As for Torrance, he was completely bewildered.

"I suppose it sounded fishy to you," Mahon reflected. "I don't quite understand why it doesn't to me—except that we've found no reason yet to suspect him. . . . Wish I could talk with him."

"You kick around here for a day or two; he's sure to turn up down the chimney or through the keyhole."

Mahon shook his head. "He doesn't want to talk to the Police. It doesn't necessarily imply guilt in an Indian. He's watching us as closely as he is the bohunks. I'll wager he knows I'm here now. The Indians never liked the Police—like a boy under his dad's eye. I guess they know they've given us our hardest jobs. You should hear Inspector Barker's stories." He strolled to the door and looked over the

river. "He's been guarding the trestle better than any of us," he mused.

Suddenly he swung about.

"Tell him he's got a clear course, unless something big threatens. I don't seem to be on the right track. We're only crossing and mussing trails by working separately. . . . If he won't work with me—tell him I'm trusting him."

CHAPTER XXI

BLUE PETE WORKS ALONE

KOPPOWSKI and his three friends climbed through the window of the shack on the top of the bank and were swallowed in the forest. And around them other shadows moved silently in the same direction.

They were on their way to the big meeting of the season. Except for a mere dozen of practised ubiquity the camp was empty; for that night, which was to seal the fate of the trestle—perhaps—Koppy was less concerned than usual that the three up on the grade should be deceived.

For days he had been polishing up the details of his plan. And of the two methods open to him for passing those details on to his followers, like a true leader he chose personal delivery. Eloquence was a never-failing inspiration of his in the face of crowds, and hysteria, his best ally, worked only at its highest pitch in the mob. Besides, there was a gratifying pomp in the meeting; the thrill he so readily imparted to his audience returned to him double-fold and opened the gates to further honours in the inner councils of the I.W.W.

Without underestimating the gravity of failure before such a gathering as he would face that night, self-confidence never deserted him; never yet had it let him down. As a born gambler he had no compunctions at staking everything on one throw.

Directly away from the grade he led deep into the woods, and all about them was movement, silent, individual, wrapped in the promise of the meeting. Presently Koppy made a peremptory motion of his hand.

"Wait!" He left them there, moving ponderously forward to the heart of a small clearing, where he paced up and down, chin in hand. The three followers watched from a distance.

"Nap—or was it Wellington—at Waterloo or somewhere!" jeered Werner in a low voice. "The mutt thinks the whole world is watching . . . and I ain't sure it ain't."

Koppy waved his hand, and they rejoined him.

Patches of darkness already filled the forest, but a late sun filtered through the tree tops in the thinner spaces and wove a pattern of colour on the brown leaves and dead green moss, the slender spruce needles and straight-standing trunks. Nature was in a gentle glow; the pure clear air of falling evening draped the earth in sweetness. Yet through it wound long lines of ghoulish men who felt it not, held to fiendish things by mistaken ambitions, by an unjustified bitterness that fed on its own helplessness. For, after all, the varying moods of nature are but constituents of a formula of which each man provides for himself the other half—else would the Eskimo be a paragon, the hunter a saint.

Koppy had explained it to Tressa in fiery words; the Independent Workers of the World had found tilled soil in the breasts of these unthinking men. By feed-

ing their smouldering bitterness against conditions due largely to themselves it had won their unreasoning fidelity; like dogs they crept to heel. Here at last was a medium in which to express their wrath. That it could profit them nothing mattered not. All they read was that, under-dogs as they were doomed to be, they might make their masters suffer.

Werner, more sensitive to the silences, grumbled at his leader's back.

"Cheerful sport, this. A real hi-larious way to end a dull day."

Morani's lip curled.

"It's all right for you, Chico," muttered Werner. "All you got to do to get your blood running fresh is to slip that stiletto into somebody's ribs. They don't expect any better of a Dago. Me? They'd fasten a rope under my ears and wish me pleasant voyage."

The Italian expectorated noisily.

"I suppose," continued Werner, "you might's well do that as spit macaroni talk at me. You get me roused and I'll tear off chunks of German and throw them—"

Koppy's hand went up for silence. The men plodded on.

At the place of meeting not a man was in sight; a great silence seemed to have stifled life itself. But as Koppy raised himself on a slight eminence in the centre of the clearing and made a gesture with his expressive hands, throngs of his followers crowded about him with no sound but shuffling feet.

As Koppy looked about on their massed faces a dis-

turbing memory of those strange moments with Tressa Torrance almost unnerved him. He understood these men; he knew the forces that had brought them down to railway work. And the flick of a still faintly breathing conscience made him pale. The daily sight of Tressa Torrance and her simple acceptance of him as a fellow-creature had roused within him thoughts he imagined he had long since stifled. There were times when he contemplated the possibility of carrying her away and leaving all else behind. Never before in America had a decent woman looked at him in such a kindly way. The many women he had known he had been willing to pay for, as was expected of him; here was one he could not buy, yet she was almost within reach for nothing.

Sometimes of late his mind had roved beyond a crude camp of logs, with filthy bunks in tiers, with filthy straw on which to lie. Carpeted rooms, with pictures on the walls, and shiny chairs and tables; smart clothes and clean hands; evenings of mental peace in a home of his own. And a woman to manage it and him. That was the bewildering part of it—he wanted a woman to order him about, some one gentle and sweet, to blot from his warped mind the hideous nightmare of strife and scheming amidst which he seemed always to have moved. He longed to have to change his clothes after the day's work, to wash and brush himself, to smile and converse in his best of English. He owed nothing to the I.W.W. that he had not repaid a hundredfold. He was a bit weary of his own passions and the direction of others.

But from beneath his shaggy brows, as he stood towering above his followers in the semi-darkness of the clearing, he read expectation—nay, even demand—in every upturned face. And the old surge of pride, the sordid memories that had kept him to his meanest tasks and sometimes convinced him of a divine mission, bent him back to his big plans. In long silence he returned their gaze, moving his head sharply from side to side to fix every eye. None knew better than he the value of silences, of the ponderous manner. Every art of the leader of mobs was his.

As if delving to their very hearts he stared into every face. And they recognised his leadership by stifled sighs and sudden breaths. Dull to reason, as to pain and pleasure, their nerves were denied the protective covering of sanity that comes with education. What they did not know was less than what they imagined. In such an atmosphere respect became reverence, irritation fury, fear panic, a sense of injustice justification for any crime. Before the piercing gaze of their leader their lips opened, their bloodshot eyes shifted, and breath came uncertainly. It was a form of mesmerism.

And when at last he burst out in an impassioned jargon that did duty as common language, they rose to him hysterically.

Truth to tell, he had called the meeting with no intention of spurring to immediate action. So much hung on the final decision that was to culminate their year's work that Koppy hesitated to give the order. The meeting had been conceived as nothing more than

a preliminary test of their loyalty and determination; perhaps he might raise their ardour to the point where it would be safe to let them know the scheme in general. The details would reach them later through trusted mouthpieces. But most of all he wanted to feel their hands on his.

But when, in the mellow light of the setting sun, he read their mad recklessness he reacted to it. Carried from his feet, he spoke fiercely, passionately, as one inspired. The passive, underground resistance of the past few weeks swept swiftly in a few sentences to open rebellion. Hesitation looked cowardly then, caution tawdry, waiting an insult to their dignity.

Werner alone did not follow him. When five hundred fists thrust as many weapons into the air and cried for action, Werner felt the urge of action of his own. Slowly he slunk to the outskirts of the mob.

"This," he said to himself, "is where Hugo Werner takes to the tall timbers. I don't hypnotise worth a cent. All Koppy's eagle eye does to me is warn me I'm not bullet-proof. Me for the safe spots; they can get as maudlin as they like. I got a hunch this is no place for Hugo Werner."

Behind him the low murmur of excitement grew to hysteria. They demanded to do something, to destroy and smash and rend. Another two minutes and nothing could hold them back. To and fro swayed five hundred hot bodies, back and forward shook five hundred threatening hands.

Koppy knew that he was master of their very souls, that there before him five hundred men awaited his

direct orders without question. Thrills tingled his scalp. With fists uplifted he shrieked at them:

"Now, now is the time! We are five hundred; they are two. They are ours. These oppressors, who have for years ground our faces to the dust, are trembling before us. Let us strike—strike! We rush, five hundred of us; we smash and wreck. Then we are masters, not slaves. *The trestle must go—now!*"

"Me, too," murmured Werner from the shadows. "Damn glad I got a start. Wonder how far it is to my next meal."

"Come closer, men, closer!" Koppy was holding out his arms to them. "Let me feel your strong hands before we strike. It is almost time. It is dark. From the crawling shadows five hundred—"

He had overdone it. Five hundred pairs of eyes tore themselves from their leader's face and shifted fearfully to the lurking, crawling shadows that closed them in.

And at the instant a dismal howl struck through the night, unplaceable, all-pervading, unearthly. At the top of its most hideous note it crashed to silence.

Five hundred pairs of eyes sought each other with the blankness of terror-numbered minds. Five hundred bodies trembled. Transfixed, they waited.

It came again, louder, crushing menace in its tone. Two piercing whistles cut it short, and some huge, unearthly creature crashed out from the darkness toward the place where they stood. A roar of cannon seemed to tear their ear-drums—another—and another—everywhere about them. With one mind five

hundred imaginative workmen dropped their weapons from nerveless hands and fled, bumping, tumbling, fighting each other. A voiceless flow of chaotic clamour marked their course toward the camp.

Koppy, teeth gnashing, threw up his hands and slunk into the darkness.

And from the shadows moved one solitary Indian and his squaw, one inoffensive little broncho, one great mongrel Russian wolfhound.

"Phew!" breathed the Indian, as he snapped his rifle shut and reached up to fondle the horse's ears.

CHAPTER XXII

NIGHT—AND THE MYSTERIOUS SPEEDERS

BIG Jim Torrance sighed happily. He was thinking of the orders he had issued for the commencement of the fill-in. In the definition thus given to the task he found the most effective silencer of every fear.

Supply trains had multiplied of late, but not the heaviest had made so much as a visible tremble in the trestle; and he should know, for he watched with bated breath and expert eye. Even the crews were teasing that they hoped once more to see home and mother. Torrance accepted their banter with a pleased grin, and hurried to tell it word for word to Tressa and Adrian.

Yet as darkness fell flashes of the old restraint held him silent and wondering. The solitude of the northern evening was making him a bit frightened of his success. Removing the old calabash pipe from his lips, he expectorated thoughtfully toward the grade.

Just within the door Tressa sat as silent as her father. In all her silent moments now she was building, building. Conrad—home—a father far from the harsh influences of this rough life where man fought man as well as nature, and quite as brutally. The rapping of her father's pipe against the doorpost interrupted her dreams.

"On Thursday!" he said. "I've spoken to Murphy.

There'll be four ballast trains here on Saturday, two working each way. Another ten days will see the thing through. The big cutting at Mile 135 will have a steam scoop to fill a train in a few minutes; it's a solid gravel bank there, they say. We'll lift the heart out of it and put it to beat in that trestle of mine to the end of time."

He laughed proudly, with a touch of sheepishness at the unaccustomed metaphor.

"Then we'll go—home," she murmured.

In his blundering way he understood, and stooped to pat her bent head.

"'Home!'" he whispered. "'Home!' If your mother could be here! . . . I know what she'd say. 'Jim,' she'd say, 'you've done well.' . . . I'd like to hear it, little girl. 'Jim.'"

"Is it so much nicer than 'daddy'?" she asked jealously; she had had this big loving man so long to herself.

He dropped to the doorsteps and reached back to throw an arm over her shoulders.

"Some day, little girl, you'll know what the one voice, the one word, means. . . . If I were dying, 'Jim' would call me back—as it seems to call me on—from somewhere now. . . . 'Jim.'"

Conrad found them thus, the man's great arm laid lightly across the girl's shoulders, her head sunk in his neck; both staring through the dusk to the mazy tangle of timbers that had been their season's care. The foreman silently drew a chair to the other side of the girl and took her hand in his.

Presently Torrance stirred, diving into his pocket in search of a host's tobacco pouch.

"Thursday," he said, handing it to Conrad.

Conrad nodded.

"And in three weeks we'll be going home," murmured Tressa,—*"going home—only three weeks!"*

A gentle birr, like the distant note of a toneless beetle, insinuated itself into their dreams. They had heard it for seconds without noticing, rising and falling on the night breeze.

Almost together the two men jerked their heads up to listen; Tressa felt their arms tighten about her. Through the darkness they strained down the track to the east, their hearts thudding almost audibly.

The sound swelled—swept toward them out of the night. Swiftly it grew to dominate the darkness, echoing through the forest. It became a roar.

"Chug—chug—chug—chug!" but in such a swiftly throbbing stream as to be almost a steady torrent of sound.

Torrance leaped to the grade and stood, a heroic figure outlined against the dim sky, struggling to pierce the mystery with his eyes.

"Speeders!" he jerked, in a breathless whisper. "Two of them, and going like hell! The rifle—quick!"

Then suddenly, not a mile away, it ceased, dying to silence in a few panting chugs, leaving the void a crash of silence. Not a breath now—it was like a nightmare. Even the camp was listening.

They heard each other's breathing catch, but that was all. Back in the locked stable the two horses

snorted with fear; the strain had reached even them.

A short ten minutes of awful waiting. Then "chug—chug—chug!" again. With fantastic rapidity the warm engines picked up to racing speed. Torrance swung his head incredulously toward Conrad.

The speeders were going the other way now.

The contractor stumbled to the shack like a blind man and sank in a chair.

"My God!" he breathed.

Three miles down the track, in what remained of a deserted end-of-steel village, Sergeant Mahon sat in his shirt sleeves, smiling across the corner of a table into the eyes of his wife, the only white woman, except Tressa Torrance, within a day's hard ride.

Of the village that ten months before covered a life as fevered as it was unclean, only the Police barracks remained in repair, since life had passed the rest by and forgotten it. The ill-defined streets, incorporated as a part of the plan of the original village only because the helter-skelter builders knew no other plan for a village, were more ill-defined than ever because less used. Where nothing but pedestrians passed, where the "Mayor" was merely proprietor of the leading dance-hall, where there was no to-morrow, there had never been side-walks. Now the space from ruined shack to tumble-down shop was overgrown with weeds. Yet down the length of it, meandering drunkenly to avoid butts of stumps as solid as the day they were axed, and steering clear of creeping

decay in the buildings themselves, a narrow path felt its way.

The two Policemen were not the sole occupants of Mile 127, as the village had been known in its day. Murphy's train crew, less particular than the Mounted Police, had satisfied themselves with minor repairs to the most reputable of the shacks. Murphy himself, and his foreman friend 'Uggins, more exclusive even than the Police, had drawn their skirts aside from anything savouring of the swift but gay life of the days of grade construction and erected for themselves a tent where the only real comfort was the opportunity it gave to sneer at their more lowly companions, and a fond but scarce justified hope that they were immune from the torments of formerly inhabited buildings. Murphy openly scored anything "any damned bohunk ever scratched himself in," and, after days of quarrelling with 'Uggins about a site, during which they struggled miserably along beneath separate ground-sheets, a common tent was decided upon far from the former selection of each and close to the new siding where "Mollie," the engine, slept at nights.

Helen Mahon was smiling back into her husband's eyes, shyly but happily, for she was proud of him—proud, too, of the loving little trick she had played on him by riding up to the barracks only a couple of hours ago, when he thought her still in Medicine Hat. Having been married to him only a few months, she was still a little shy with her happiness.

"Helen," he exclaimed for the tenth time, "I don't believe it's true. Williams is going to dig his heel

into me and tell me I'm snoring. I always do when I dream."

"And you don't like dreaming?" she asked slyly.

"As a dream," he corrected, "it's a ripper. At the same time I'd like to have some help to realise it. How did you manage it? Of course every one knows you have Inspector Barker in the hollow of your hand, but there were others to win over."

She gurgled joyously and seized his hand to press it against her cheek and nibble lovingly at the finger tips.

"Inspector Barker did it all. He's got a way with him, and I just made him pull the wires right up to the Commissioner, I guess. Anyway, here I am, and there's nobody defied by it. I suppose they reckoned that any wife who thinks enough of her husband to travel two days by train, then two more on horseback, is worth encouraging for the salvation of his soul. To sum up: I'm here for a month, if you'll let me stay."

The laugh with which he greeted it was not so free and spontaneous as she hoped to hear. "In less than that," he said fervently, "I hope we'll be back in Medicine Hat. Torrance is giving orders to start the fill-in, and there won't be more than two or three weeks after that. Truth to tell, there are lots of other reasons than home that make me want to get out of it in a hurry. It isn't that we have much to do—too little, indeed; I'd grow rusty and evil-tempered with another season of this—but I confess to a great mental blank in considering the bohunk . . . and I've no am-

bition to understand him better. The more I know him, the more I think Providence was experimenting without encouragement when he created a few of those Continental countries that send their scum over here to build railways. Really there hasn't been a thing happen since I came worth writing about. Of course there are strange little incidents—"

He broke off abruptly and his head went up. From the east drifted a purring sound that swelled with startling speed. Faster than their thoughts, it grew to a roar. Helen was alarmed.

"Only gasoline speeders," he explained. "You must ride on one. Torrance has a rather grubby specimen. They're the wildest form of slimpsy-skimpsy flight you ever saw. About forty miles an hour, with just a board and a tremendous sputter between you and the flying rails. It makes your hair curl, yet you look forward to the next time."

Lightly as he spoke, he had risen to his feet and gone to the doorway.

"Some of the big moguls of construction, I suppose," he shouted back above the echoing din. "Perhaps to pass on Torrance's trestle before the fill-in commences. Holy mackinaw! they're scorching. I ought to arrest them for exceeding the speed limit. . . . They're without lights, too!" he exclaimed suddenly.

Two dim objects flew past in the darkness like shadows, not forty yards away, a space of less than fifty yards between them.

"They must be drunk!" he muttered. "They're taking awful chances to run as close as that at such

a speed. Look as if they're loaded. Rush stuff, I suppose, for the line further west. . . . I hope they don't try to take Torrance's trestle at that gait; it would be an awful plunge." He returned thoughtfully to the table. "First time I've seen a speeder along here, except Torrance's and the contractor's at Mile 190. . . . I don't understand it."

Helen closed the door firmly. The roar dimmed into the trees.

"This is *my* night," she declared. "What you don't understand about railway construction doesn't need to be worried about. Anyway they're gone. It isn't often a man's wife drops in on him from four days of wandering, when he thinks her two hundred miles away as the crow flies."

He looked about the room with an apologetic smile. "It isn't the place I'd choose to bring you to, Helen, though Williams has done a lot in the couple of hours since you arrived. It doesn't seem the same old room. If you'd believe me, he wants four days off to scare up some luxuries worthy of the event down at Saskatoon . . . and I can't convince myself it's part of our duties. He got quite huffy when I refused. That's the worst of marrying a woman every man falls in love with. The only redeeming feature is that we've lots of room; there's bedroom space enough for half Medicine Hat—though I wouldn't recommend it to my friends. . . . I believe bohunks do bathe—they must have a human trait or two—but I've never happened to see it. The nearest approach was two semi-civilised fellows down at the river one evening sheep-

ishly dipping their hands in the water and wiping them on a discarded shirt. And shirts aren't discarded here until they're past wearing. It wasn't promising for results, but it showed good will."

He pushed across a plate of abnormal raspberries. "Try another sample. Our mutual friend, 'Uggins, hand-selected them from a thousand miles of laden bushes. I believe he and Murphy almost came to blows over them because, after finding fault with the china in which they were to be presented, Murphy contended that he knew a spot where larger ones grew. 'Uggins was undecided whether to look for the spot and give Murphy a chance to forestall him, or to insult you by offering you something not reputed to be the best."

She nibbled at the berries that, ever since the seed had been borne hither on the winds, had been reserved for birds and bears. But her husband was not at ease. Twice in the next ten minutes he went to the door and listened up the track.

"They must be stopping at Torrance's," he said, throwing wide the door and leaning against the side as he talked. "It'll make some excitement, at any rate, for a nice little girl who's going a bit to seed. No . . . they're coming back!" He paused to listen, his brow wrinkling. "That's quick work, whatever they did."

The roaring putter was rushing back toward them at a speed that sounded foolishly desperate.

"There's no sense in going like that," he said irritably. "I wonder what they were doing. I'll find out."

He ran into the darkness and stood on the track between the rails, flashing an electric torch toward the approaching speeders. But they came on without a sign that they saw. He shouted. Fifty yards away the noise of the engines burst into a louder torrent of sound, and he had but time to leap out of their way as they whizzed past, the second speeder so close to the first that he could do nothing to stop it.

Before Mahon, thoroughly angry, could think of anything worth doing, Helen stood beside him, thrusting into his hand his Police revolver. Almost with the touch he fired above the retreating speeders.

Two spurts of flame jabbed at him through the darkness in reply, and Mahon jerked his wife to the ground.

"I think, dear," he said, as he gravely lifted her to her feet, "that you shouldn't have come."

CHAPTER XXIII

RIFLES!

MIRA and Blue Pete rested on the ground in the shadows of the clump of spruce that concealed the entrance to their cave, watching the flicker of the setting sun on the smooth surface of the sluggish river. Except for moccasins and blankets they always wore now the Indian disguise in which Torrance and his friends knew them. In the semi-darkness of the trees the old corncob pipe sparked rapidly, sweeter to the halfbreed than nectar, for Mira had held the match that lit it.

Night after night he was content to sit like that, her small hand cuddled in his; but in the evening hours there were so many things to do toward the fulfilment of their dream.

"Jest a coupla weeks more, Mira," he murmured. "Mebbe a few days longer."

"And the last two horses?"

"I'll git 'em somehow. It gits harder every time the bohunks do things, 'cause somebody's allus watchin'. But I never was fooled yet, an' no tender-foot's goin' to start. . . . Only I don't want no shootin'."

"Perhaps he'll sell now when the time's so near."

Blue Pete laughed mirthlessly. "Yuh don't know Torrance. He said he wudn't, an' that's better'n a million dollars to him."

"But you think he's going to give them to us when he's through?"

She leaned forward anxiously to catch a glimpse of his swarthy face in the dim light, and he did not reply until he had considered it.

"If I was sartin! But if, when I'd lef' 'em to the las' minute, if he took it in his head to pull out with 'em! I dassent take no chances. I gotta have them horses."

He knew by her silence that she was contemplating the possibility of failure.

"If yuh say so, Mira, mebbe I cud git myself to take 'em now an' pull out."

She was fighting the stern battle which in his innocence he had roused in her hungry mind, and for a moment he trembled for the result. Vaguely he felt that he had done something unfair in shifting the responsibility to her shoulders, but whatever her answer he knew what his duty was; and only her wishes could drown that duty.

"Bert is waiting for us down in the Hills," she sighed, not to unsettle his convictions but merely as a fact to be considered.

"Mebbe yuh'd bes' run down an' tell him we'll be a while yet," he replied, understanding her perfectly. "I don't see no way out neither. I'll come 'long soon's I can. Whiskers an' me can git the horses down."

She gurgled softly into the darkness, and clasped his arm with both her hands. Nothing more was necessary. A thrill ran through his big frame, and almost reverently he pressed his dark cheek against her hair.

Thus they sat, until the gleam faded from the water and only a dim glow remained; and the pale sky peeped down through the trees with the chill of a clear moon. High up in the unseen trails of the air a flight of wild geese honked its weary way southward, and the halfbreed read the warning of approaching winter. Some creature splashed into the water straight before them with a noise that awakened the forest echoes and deepened the enveloping silence afterwards. Juno lifted her head and sniffed, and nosed into her mistress. She longed to get into the open and howl, and this was how she fought the instinct. Deepest peace closed down on them with the night.

It was Juno heard the speeders first. With a faint whimper she lifted her ears and sniffed to the east. It was sufficient for Blue Pete. In an instant he had picked out the purring sound and went back into the cave for blanket and moccasins and rifle. When he returned, the throbbing was booming through the woods, though the grade was a mile and a half away, and the speeders miles more.

At first he did not hurry. His move to closer quarters with the oncoming speeders was little more than instinct. He had no reason to be suspicious, but he always wanted to unravel the unknown that was tangible and audible and visible. If the speeders were going through there was no chance of his reaching the grade in time to satisfy his curiosity; if they were stopping at the trestle there was no hurry. With unerring sense he made straight for the trestle.

As he walked along he was conscious of rising con-

cern, of more than ordinary personal connection with the visitors, and in a minute or two he was running in the long easy lope which carries the Indian over incredible distances in a space of time that challenges the ordinary horse.

So that when the rattle of the engines ceased with suspicious suddenness midway between the end-of-steel village and the trestle he was not far from the grade. He deflected his course and presently, with scarcely deepened breath to show the speed at which he had come, he was watching from the shadows a strange scene.

In a long line, soundless but for the hurried tramp of their heavy boots, dim figures emerged from the bush, lifted something from a speeder, and disappeared the way they had come. The first speeder, already unloaded, stood awaiting its companion. Blue Pete saw at first without grasping the meaning. Then a jangle of metal enlightened him.

Rifles—that was what these men were carrying away!

For an agonised moment he felt unequal to the occasion. He knew in a flash what arms portended among these foreign devils. But it was too late to do much to forestall it. One speeder load was gone, and the second was emptying fast. He might frighten the silent porters away and perhaps capture the remainder of their burdens, but that would, at best, rob them of a few dozen rifles, while scores—perhaps hundreds—were by this time secure. And the bohunks would be warned.

A plan developed.

If only he had brought Mira! She could trail almost as well as he, and her wits were quick. Danger or no danger, if only Mira were there to help! On the trail of the last figure he crept, and the chug of the flying speeders roared back to him in diminuendo.

The task he had set himself was an easy one. The man he followed, clumsy and stupid, was anxious only to make speed. In among the trees he led, though not far from the grade, and when at last he stopped and began to rustle among the leaves and dead boughs, Blue Pete knew he had reached the end of the trail. Yet even as the man worked feverishly the halfbreed visualised the spot; and he knew no great cache could be there. It puzzled him, alarmed him.

When the man was gone, and Blue Pete feverishly tore away the brush and leaves, he realised with a pang of shame and alarm how he had been outwitted. The rifles had been removed armful by armful. And armful by armful they had been hidden, each in its own hiding place. There was no common cache to rob, no possibility now of laying hands on the lot.

In deep dejection the halfbreed returned to the cave with his burden. Mira met him at the door without even a murmur of surprise. And as he dumped the load noisily on the stone floor, she pointed to another little pile in a distant niche.

"They've beat us, Pete. It was Werner I trailed. I just banged him over the head with a stick and he dropped everything and bolted."

And Blue Pete chuckled. He could see only one picture: Werner, running and tumbling through the forest, squealing with more fright than pain, preparing as he ran a tall story for his leader.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SCHEMES OF A LEADER

IGNACE KOPPOWSKI, lazily rolling a cigarette, stood before his shack on the hill, apparently absorbed in the camp scene at his feet. In reality he was watching Torrance and Conrad watching him from the shack beside the trestle. After a time he returned inside, picked up his hat from the bunk and, rolling another cigarette, strolled out, pulling the door behind him.

From the shaded side of the hut he put his fingers to his nose and waggled them in the direction of the grade, then he climbed back through the window. Inside, every vestige of impudence deserted him. A grave frown puckered his forehead as he seated himself thoughtfully on the solitary chair to sit like a statue staring at the floor. Certain sudden twistings of his clumsy frame revealed the vagrant meanderings of his mind, now satisfied and determined, now uncertain and reflective. Plainly it was a mind that refused to settle.

Thus he missed the first three low taps on the wall of his hut. When it was repeated he jerked his head nervously, stared for an appreciable moment at an upper corner of the room, gripped his fists and teeth, and whispered a soft response.

Werner's head appeared in the window space, smiled, pushed through, followed by a scrambling body. After

him came Morani, Heppel, and eighteen villainous-looking companions. Werner, first to enter, as usual, selected the bunk, throwing himself on it with a cunning smile. He always thought too quickly for the others. His companions littered the floor, Koppy retaining the seat of state. Twenty-two vile-featured conspirators gathered in solemn conclave.

A twenty-third, not so vile-featured but swarthier of skin, sank softly against the logs at the rear of the shack, one ear pressed to a chink.

"You've gone the rounds?" demanded Koppy, probing each face in turn.

One of the men spoke hesitatingly: "Simoff's rifles gone. We find place—all gone."

Koppy turned on him. "Sure?" He knew the craven hearts and beclouding imaginations of these companions of his.

"We saw marks. It was the place."

The frown on their leader's forehead deepened, and for a long time he was wrapped in thought. "Yours, too, Werner!" he muttered, shaking his head.

Werner read censure into the three words. "That dirty redskin caught me a clump on the coco from behind, and then a whole lot of Indians jumped on me. See, there's the lump." He felt tenderly of the crown of his head, but made no advance to enable his friends to verify his claim; it was too sore for that. "I just dropped. When I came round, the rifles were gone."

"You saw the Indian?"

"Sure I saw him." In time he recalled the dark-

ness and added hastily, "with my nose. You can't fool this guy when an Indian's within a mile. I know when they're inside the township. I guess I ought to: I used to steal with 'em, out further west, trapping we was—or stealing from the other fellow's traps. Smell 'em? Well, I guess."

"Do you smell one now?" asked Koppy suddenly.

Twenty-one pair of eyes went swiftly to the window. Blue Pete, at his chink behind the shack, held his ground, but his muscles were tense.

Werner grinned at the little joke.

"There ain't much chance to smell anything else with this bunk of yours under my nose. When they burn this shack down—and they got to if they're going to live in the country—somebody's going to be asphyxiated. I hope I'm five hundred miles away about then."

Koppy, struggling with anger and scorn, frowned on the would-be humourist, who hastily grinned.

"Course you know it's only a joke of mine, Koppy."

"Better so," returned the leader coldly. "Many Indians about?" He was searching Werner's eyes. "You saw—or smelt them."

Werner wilted under that stare. Volubly he struggled to support his story with convincing details, but his face was flushed and his eyes were anywhere but on his leader's. And Koppy smiled inscrutably.

"Anyway, we still got ninety-two rifles," stammered Werner. "That surely ought—"

Koppy struck him to sudden silence by a peremptory hand. "You talk too much," he said acidly.

"Just let me fire the first shot, that's all I want," babbled Werner, reading the disfavour under which he rested. "I'll blow the whole bunch to hell."

Morani's long knife passed slickly back and forth on the side of his boot; and they watched with staring eyes. A dirty, moistened finger tested the keen edge, the dark, cruel face lit up with satisfaction, and the weapon slid unobtrusively out of sight somewhere in the Italian's clothing.

Werner shuddered. "It's a wonder your vittles don't sour on your stomach, Chico. Every time I dream I can feel that stiletto spiding down my spine."

And then, by a stealthy, apparently innocent movement, the knife was out again, sliding along the leather of the boot.

"If you don't put that sticker where it belongs," protested Werner, "I'm going to carry a gun. I suppose you got to be carving something. Well, go out and tackle a log. You was brought up on a knife instead of a spoon."

"Saturday night!" Koppy announced suddenly.

"Er—what's that?" Werner had straightened on the bunk and was regarding his leader with fearful eyes. "Ah—yes—Saturday night. But don't you think a week from now, say next Tuesday—"

"Saturday night," repeated Koppy.

"If you wouldn't be so swift, Koppy, I was going to point out that the moon will be darker a few days later. I'm a regular nightingale when it comes to the dark."

"Some bird!" sneered Koppy. "Maybe you flew from the Indians."

"Look here, old chap," Werner bridled, "you don't think I ran about looking for that Indian and threw the damn things at him?"

"You run-a spry away from him," jeered Morani.

Werner made a furious movement, but noticed the Italian's knife-hand in time.

"I wish to blazes I'd run spryer before he hit me. Anybody's welcome to this knob on my nut. Trouble was I was too heavily armed to fight. Ask me my private opinion and I'd say Mavy's brought his tribe down to bother us. I'm game to butt up against anything that wears boots. But them Indians don't even wear pants—not what you'd notice."

"Indians got-a you—they wear pants, no?" leered Morani.

Koppy interrupted what promised to develop into a row.

"At one o'clock Saturday night," he announced in a loud voice. "Till then no touch rifles. Say nothing till the day. That's all."

He dismissed them with a wave of his hand. The halfbreed lifted himself from the ground behind the shack and slunk away.

Half the conspirators were already through the window when Koppy made a movement of his hand toward the camp. Creatures of his will, they obeyed without a word and wound away, later to drop down to the camp. Koppy followed. Straight through the unkempt cluster of buildings they went until they were

out in the open river bottom far from the nearest group of gamblers, who turned dull eyes on them between plays.

Koppy seated himself and waved to his followers to do the same. Up at the end of the trestle the light from the boss's shack twinkled through the gloom. Close beside them the gurgle of the waters was soft and soothing, and the colour-touched clouds above the setting sun cast an unreal glow over the edges of the river bank. Koppy moved his eyes about uncomfortably on the day's good-night. The mumblings of Werner brought him to the task in hand.

"We attack to-morrow night at midnight!" he announced.

A gasp went up from the lips about him. Fanatic and bloodthirsty as they were, the imminence of the ordeal that was to requite their wrongs startled them. Their preference was to curse their bosses and spur others to dangerous revenge. In moments of carefully developed hysteria they were reckless enough—when the hour came they would probably go forward blindly, with the foolhardiness of the ignorant—but Koppy's methods to-night were singularly unenflaming.

Werner expressed himself first:

"Like hell we do!"

Koppy ignored their agitation; for some reason he did not choose to exercise then the petty arts of the leader.

"Perhaps some one hear up there," he explained, jerking an impatient thumb toward the shack they had left. "I fool him."

"You fool us, too," grumbled Werner.

"To-morrow night at midnight we strike. Boss asleep, everybody asleep. Police asleep, too. Sure thing!"

"I be blown!" Werner snarled to himself. "Here I been counting on a week or so to live—or make a getaway. Now I'm to be shot at midnight! A dog would get a fairer chance."

"At supper to-morrow tell the men," ordered Koppy. "Morani get dynamite. Werner take ten men and watch Mr. Conrad—perhaps a knife. Heppel tear up track and stop Police. Lomask take ten rifles back of boss's shack. Hoffman smash boss's speeder. One-Eye Sam take rock-hogs to trestle. Dimhoff cut wires."

Silence was over the group. Even in their trepidation the completeness of their leader's programme overawed them. Werner alone, driven by his fears, forgot to await the formal dismissal that was the main feature of the ritual, and started away. Koppy waved him back angrily.

"One thing—remember!" He glared about on them.

"There's a hundred and one I'm trying to remember before I kick the bucket," murmured Werner. "But all I seem to get is a picture of a thousand bullets meanderin' about loose to-morrow night in the dark at midnight, and the worst of them's not going to be going away from us."

The leader closed the mouth of the fearful one with a look.

"Remember"—the grinness of Koppy's tone was a threat—"the girl's mine."

"First catch your fish," muttered Werner.

"All the others, kill. But the girl—must not—be hurt! Understand?"

"Not till you get your ugly paws on her!" said Werner with a significant leer.

CHAPTER XXV

BLUE PETE AND WHISKERS TO THE RESCUE

ALL the way back to the cave Blue Pete pondered over the situation. The attack was four days off. There was little time if the I.W.W. plans were to be defeated with certainty and completeness. Reinforcements must be brought from other Police posts—therein alone lay certain safety.

The halfbreed hesitated before the idea of more Mounted Police about until he had completed his work; and they might be summoned any time by wire from the gravel pit at Mile 135, where a ticker had just been installed for the work of filling in the trestle. Also he paused before the indignity of calling in reinforcements to defeat a lot of blundering fools and cowards. Deep within him was the conviction that nothing more was required than his own unerring rifle. Only the matter of those ninety-two rifles and the presence of Tressa Torrance forced him to consider the situation worthy of prolonged thought. He decided to take the night to think it over. To-morrow after dark would be ample time to carry out any plan that seemed wise.

The result of a wakeful night was the decision to carry the story to Torrance and leave the rest in his hands. That plan, too, fitted in with certain undefined ambitions of his own. He did not want the Police to

know far enough ahead to nip the whole affair in the bud. Blue Pete loved a scrap; he had also certain definite debts to pay to Koppy, and the thought of a lot of bohunks within range of a licensed rifle made him smile happily. An inborn decency craved to teach these brutes decency in the only way he knew.

All day long he fought a crowding impatience. He had early come to the decision to keep Mira in the dark. She would take the threatened attack more seriously than it deserved, and perhaps forestall his plans—probably run to the Police right away. Besides, he did not want her to be involved in the battle that promised.

Certain fantastic schemes popped in and out of his head during the day, and one of them he discussed with Mira, without letting her know its immediate origin. If he shot the leaders of the bohunks himself—picked them off from hiding, as he easily could—trouble would cease. The work would run through to completion with greater certainty and speed, and he and Mira would be starting back for freedom in a fortnight. But Mira killed the plan in a few words; Blue Pete was ever apt to ignore the law in his dislike of certain forms of lawlessness.

At one stage he thought it would be sufficient to appear at Torrance's shack just before the attack and add his rifle to the defence.

On the other hand, were the story taken to the Police they would ignore everything in the pursuit of the leaders of the promised battle; and that might well mean the postponement of the completion of the trestle

to the following summer. And Blue Pete could not face that. Besides, those rifles must be captured.

The halfbreed accordingly determined to make his report to Torrance, and if the contractor treated it too lightly, he could then inform the Police.

With that in view he set out late in the evening for the trestle. He had delayed until the shadows were deep enough to protect him from prying eyes. Mahon's evident suspicions demanded extra precautions in approaching the shack. For no reason of which he was conscious he chose to follow the edge of the river bank.

By the time he reached the height overhanging the camp the lighted canvas and open doorways were brilliant spots in the darkness. Yet instantly he experienced a feeling of discomfort. And feelings like that were always his guiding motives. He could not explain the cause of his worry, for the sounds of camp life seemed little less than usual, but he paused a long time above the dotted scene, eyes and ears alert. Feverishly he sought Koppy's shack. When he found it empty, the light burning and the door open, he dropped back into the shrubbery and began to climb swiftly downward toward the camp. He knew now that more lights than usual burnt there, that the few discordant instruments strumming and blowing were overexerting themselves. Certainly the bohunks were not in bed.

Crawling rapidly about, avoiding patches of light, a thrill like fear flooded him. With a stifled exclamation he leaped up and retraced his steps to the higher

level, climbing with the assurance and agility of a mountain goat.

No longer did he think of silence. The lifelong instinct fell from him like a cloak. Speed—speed—that was everything. When the trees closed him in he realised that he was not alone. Other moving forms everywhere enabled him to run openly.

A group came toward him, and Blue Pete threw himself flat. And as they passed he caught their outline against the lighter western sky, where still remnants of day lingered.

Every one carried a rifle!

He waited for nothing more. As he had never run before he sped through the bush, bearing due south-east toward the deserted end-of-steel village, avoiding trees and fallen logs with uncanny ease. Some heard him and paused in their course, but they were keyed up to serious work, and there were so many of their friends abroad. Probably a messenger of their leader's on pressing duty.

Half a mile to the east Blue Pete pulled up. Two piercing whistles he sent in rapid succession into the night, and in a moment repeated them. Then he resumed his running, shifting direction toward the grade, where the course would be clearer. At intervals he whistled the shrill double blast.

Many a bohunk heard the whistle and shivered without knowing why. Conrad, returning from the trestle down the long slope to his shack, stopped and wondered, though it was dim and far away by then. Koppy and his immediate friends lifted guilty heads

and questioned each other. Werner, nerves jangling, thoughtlessly pleaded the superior advantages of next Tuesday; and then bethought himself and advised more precipitous action. Nothing within a day's hard ride could stop Koppy now—one hundred rifles against four or five.

Blue Pete was running steadily now. Rifle hanging loose, he swung in and out among the trees as if every obstacle were limned in daylight. Early in the race he had discarded his blanket. His feet shrank from the rough way in their unaccustomed moccasins. Only once did he falter: a vagrant thought pulled him up, to feel anxiously at his cartridge belt. Smoothly, without panting, stooping in the loose lope of the Indian, he swung along.

He was whistling less frequently, conserving his breath for a possible three-mile race; but his head kept turning to listen.

Presently a great sigh of relief, like a sob, fluttered between his lips. Almost at the edge of the clearing along the grade he slowed down.

And then, running so quietly, the ugly little pinto, Whiskers—the marks of the pinto long since gone before the halfbreed's doctoring hand—was cantering at his side. Without a break in his stride Blue Pete leaped to the bare back, one hand dropping to pat the arched neck.

"Bully ole gal, Whiskers! I knowed yuh'd hear. Yer ears is allus skinned fer the whistle, ain't they—an' eyes like a cat's, same as yer boss, eh? Yuh got to git some now, ole gal. Yuh ain't had a real run

fer so long mebbe yuh're gittin' a bit seedy, like me. Well, yuh got a coupla miles right on yer tip-toes. Git goin', ole gal."

Close along the grade the little pinto lay low to its stride, and the halfbreed's feet seemed to be brushing the ground as he leaned forward to whisper encouragement in the flicking ears.

CHAPTER XXVI

SERGEANT MAHON'S VISION

FOR the fifth time Sergeant Mahon and Helen had firmly expressed their intention of retiring; the hour, they agreed, was unseemly, when now weeks of almost unbroken association stretched ahead of them. Yet for the fifth time they had failed to act on their convictions.

For one thing they were impressed with the selfishness of retiring while still Constable Williams sat with never a flicker of sleep in his eyes. They owed him a lot for his attentions of the past few days, and there were few opportunities of squaring the account. In the rude chair he had salved from the village wreckage the big fellow was content to sit to any hour of the night, merely smoking and listening, face beaming, pleased as a child when he found something to say. For two years he had been locked there in the wilds, with never a woman but Tressa Torrance to whom he could speak without a blush. And, looking into the clear eyes of Mrs. Mahon, he blushed a little now at memories of her predecessors in that infamous end-of-steel village—blond-haired, flashing eyed, bejewelled, strident voiced hussies who had worn out their welcome in society less base.

For the sixth time Mahon consulted his watch and shook his head self-reprovingly.

“Half-past eleven! Dissipation. And to-morrow

we must dive deeper into the records of those two speeders. I don't know that I'm quite fair, Williams, but I imagine Torrance hasn't been taking us completely into his confidence, though he seems thoroughly stirred over this. They have me guessing—the most unlikely things, even to some silly club wager. But there isn't a club within three hundred miles. I'm off to-morrow to Mile 135. Torrance says the ticker is set up there. I want to talk to Saskatoon."

Constable Williams shrugged his shoulders. "Those speeders were up to something they're not telling Saskatoon or any one else that we're apt to get any information from."

"That's what I'm going to find out. They couldn't go far without being seen, and they'd have to stick to the railway. There's still a gang clearing up at Mile 63, I think."

"That was where I spent the night, wasn't it?" asked his wife. "There's an engineer there with his whole family and two women besides. It's a long way to be from neighbours."

"One never speaks of neighbours out here, Mrs. Mahon," smiled Constable Williams. "It makes one homesick. It's so long since we had neighbours that we've gone a bit rusty on the amenities of society. There's so little we can do for the first woman—"

"Williams, you're fishing." Mahon shook his head affectionately at his subordinate. "If you'd heard my wife this morning—"

"If you don't mind, dear," interrupted Helen, "I prefer to give my own thanks."

"But you just said this morning you couldn't—"

"Don't try, please," said Williams, with a grin. He drew a sigh. "I suppose now I ought to forego a selfish pleasure and let you go to bed. If I could only look sleepy! But I feel as if bed were an interruption, a nasty, bad-dispositioned, irritating kill-joy. And you'll be heavy with the chloroform of this rare air. Ah, me! Just when life begins—"

"It won't go down, Williams," teased Mahon. "The air up here has nothing on Medicine Hat. Not even its wildest booster would claim for the Hat the poison of a manufacturing town. Meteorologically it must be as far from civilisation as Mile 127. The worst up here is trying to compete with the sun in the matter of sleep. In the summer one would get about three hours; in the winter there wouldn't be time to prepare meals. Winter must be eerie. Even now I scent it—"

He shifted suddenly in his chair. Then with a dash he and Williams were crowding through the open door with drawn revolvers.

Through the night came the thunder of racing hoofs.

Mahon knew that speed. Many a time he had ridden thus, the wind whistling past his ears and the horse's mane flicking his stinging face. He knew, too, that a master-hand directed the horse he heard.

Without a word the two Policemen separated and dropped into the shadows on either side of the shaft of light from the doorway.

"Go into the other room, Helen." Mahon's order was sharp and low.

On came the racing horse, the pound of its hoofs echoing through the trees like the charge of a troop, filling the vast silence with piercing fancies. Echo and hoof-beats grew louder and louder; there was no other sound. At the edge of the village the horse turned from the clearing along the grade into the main street, and the echo, sharpened now by crowding walls, sent the blood tingling through the Sergeant's veins.

Over the pounding hoofs broke a muttering voice.

In another five seconds the horse would cross the shaft of light. Mahon and Williams raised their guns. The former edged out toward the narrow path. He had no thought of warning the man—he wished to see him dash into that shaft of light, that eyes might come to the aid of ears. Another moment. . . .

With a slithering of hoofs the horse pulled up in mid-flight at the very edge of the beams. A voice, husky with anxiety, shouted:

"Sergeant, Sergeant Mahon! Quick! For God's sake!"

At the first sound Mahon felt the blood rush to his head. His knees shook. His left hand groped to his forehead. Then he wrenched himself back to his duty.

"What is it?" His voice was quiet, but he avoided the light.

Slowly and soundlessly he was moving down the other edge of the light, revolver poised, eyes straining into the darkness beyond. In the dim fringe he made out the figure of a tall man leaning toward him, a pair of Indian braids falling over his shoulders. Mahon's eyes moved on to the horse. He started, and his teeth

clicked. Surely there was something familiar. . . . But his brain was tumbling madly—he would not trust it.

The Indian, blinded by the light, spoke rapidly:

"They're attackin'—right away—a hundred rifles—blow up the trestle—kill the girl an' th' others!"

Neither the ride nor the run was making him pant like that.

The Sergeant leaped across the light and struck. With digging heels the Indian swung the pinto on its hind legs, at the same time striking at the outstretched hand. But he was too late. Mahon's open palm fell on Whiskers' rump, and in the very midst of rearing about she leaped forward into the light.

Mahon rubbed his eyes. A wild laugh came to his lips. This was no pinto. No ugly blotches there—only a dead brown. Whiskers? As ridiculous as his other fancies of late. But it must be Whiskers' twin sister.

The Indian and his horse were gone, racing back at full speed. Mahon ran to the barracks. Once more he was the Mounted Policeman. In the doorway stood Helen.

"Whiskers!" she breathed in an awed voice. "Blue—"

"Don't be foolish," he scoffed. "You saw the broncho. Not a blotch on it. For God's sake, don't start my dreams again, Helen."

Williams was already cramming his bandolier with cartridges and buckling it over his shoulder. Helen seized a flashlight and hurried through the back door

to the stable. In thirty seconds they followed. They saw her reappear—they heard her startled call:

“Gone!”

Mahon stared past her into the empty stalls.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN IRISHMAN AND AN ENGLISHMAN

CONSTABLE Williams cursed fervently, forgetting Helen. It was his way of rendering first aid. Mahon's mind was too busy for his lips. Therein lay the foundation of their respective ranks. In ten seconds he was running for the street.

Throwing the flash ahead of him as he ran, he wriggled at top speed down the winding path that led through the village; and Constable Williams stumbled behind. As the last of the deserted shacks fell behind, a luminous spot ahead led them straight to Murphy's tent. From forty yards Mahon shouted:

"How long to get steam up, Murphy? It's life and death, and we need the engine."

A bewhiskered face thrust itself through the opening, carefully pulling the flap below to cut off a fleeting glimpse of bare legs and loose shirt.

"What ye take us for? Night nurses? Think we're taking shifts keeping Mollie snuggled up warm o' nights? Go away and change yeer dhrinks. What's the hullabaloo anyway? Short o' tobacco? Or has the newest tenderfoot discovered the one lone flea in all this lousy village?"

"The bohunks are attacking the trestle! They've stolen our horses."

Murphy asked no more foolish questions; he was busy with his overalls.

"Dunno about getting you there right away," he grunted, tugging at a suspender, "but sure the next instant. Glory be! ain't we afther getting in late to-noight—and me blasting the hide o' me crew and old man Torrance? And 'Uggins didn't draw the fires, he was that lazy and cantankerous himself—"

"Call the crew!" ordered Mahon. "We'll need them."

"'Ere's 'Uggins," said a small voice from the edge of the cot.

The fireman was pulling on his second sock. He waited for nothing more. Shirt flapping about his short legs, he ran into the night, shouting at the top of his voice.

"Have you arms?" Mahon enquired of Murphy.

"Wish I had about three more o' thim for this collar-button," grumbled the engineer before the mirror.

"Have you a gun, I asked?"

"Well," said Murphy carefully, "if ye're enquir-ring to enfor-rce the law agin carrying arms, nary a jack-knife even. If it's help ye nade, I guess we might be able to scrape up a shooter apiece. We lug 'em along for ballast, ye understand, in the absence o' fire-water. If it's a foighter ye're talking like, ivery devil of a mother's son of us can make a bang like a gun, with a bullet t'rowed in—though for meself I prefer a shillalah. I'm going to be in this foight if I have to use a lead pencil. Ain't I Oirish?"

"For heaven's sake, let the collar and tie go!" groaned Mahon.

Murphy turned a disgusted face on the Policeman. "Niver go into a foight excited-like. It's dangerous. I wouldn't enjoy meself if it's too scrambly a show. 'Tain't ivery day a fellow has a chance out here to get into one. Anyway, 'Uggins has to get steam up. . . . Now I'm ready for anything from dam-sels to any other damn thing."

As they ran from the tent, the shacks the crews had taken to themselves were bustling with activity. Four half-clothed figures, pulling on jackets as they ran, fell in behind them and made for the siding where great gusts of flame revealed Huggins' frantic struggle with the engine.

The half-naked fireman was firing recklessly, madly. Limitless dry wood was at his hand, and from the live coals that remained from the day's work a mass of flame was already throwing heavy sparks against the smokestack guard. But Huggins was a fuming thing of cursing impatience. Mouthing unlisted oaths, his wet shirt lashing against his bare legs, he was repeatedly filling a small pail from a nearby barrel and, standing on the cab steps, was tossing its contents into the blazing fireplace. Great gushes of fire roared out in response, revealing him, face streaming perspiration, lips moving ceaselessly, one sock hanging in tatters, already swinging about for the next pail.

Murphy looked on in anxious admiration.

"Holy smoke! Here I been wor-rrking five years to get a hustle on that Englishman, and him arguing coal

oil was made for wiping engines and lighting lamps and smelling up a grocery store. . . . That's what I call a medal job. Anyway," he added, as a greater gush than usual burst out and seemed to lick about the frantic fireman, "there ain't much o' him to catch fire, if he don't tumble down them steps in time. . . . Poof! That must have been half the barrel. For the love of Mike!" he bawled, wiping the soot from his eyes, "Here, you crazy bat, go aisy. The cab'll be catching fire."

"Garn!" yelled Huggins, reaching for a fresh supply. "Look arfter yer own blinkin' cab, yu blighter!"

"Blighter, is it?" Murphy was dancing excitedly about—until he got in the fireman's way, to receive such a furious push that he went sprawling on his back. He lifted himself to his feet as if something new had entered his experience, and stood agitatedly chewing his beard.

"When this foight's over," he announced solemnly, "there's going to be another that'll make the one at the threstle look like a Sunday School picnic; and Oireland's going to put England over her knee and spank the place yeer shirt don't cover dacent. . . . Stop it, ye loon! Make a pair o' pants o' the rest o' the ile and look respectable. Ye don't seem to remember Mollie's sex. I'm ashamed o' ye. . . . Climb aboard, ye fools—and ithers. She'll do five miles on what she has, and in three miles she'll be cutting' out twenty. . . . For the sake o' me dead and buried mother, somebody sit on that barrel or we'll be one short in the foight! I got to work in this cab! He's gone daffy!

He'll miss the fireplace some time and set the bush on fire!"

Huggins' blind haste was deaf to everything but the clang of the starting lever and the grind of the big wheels. Grabbing the rail, he swung aboard, a half-filled pail clutched tight. And Murphy had only time to knock it from his hand to save the seven of them from one last gush of flame. Huggins swore deeply, swept a black arm across his dripping eyes, and leaned out to estimate their speed.

Engine and tender chugged out from the siding. And Murphy leaned through the window and broke all traffic rules.

"Jump on, ye loon!" he yelled to the brakesman standing by the open switch. "Think I'm going to waste steam stopping for you?" The brakesman swung aboard. "All the specials are cancelled to-noight for the foight. We got three miles o' clear track. Go on, Mollie!"

But he was wrong. Lack of steam pressure alone saved them. Murphy, staring ahead into the beam of the headlight, suddenly grabbed a lever in either hand, yelling a warning:

"Hang on, b'ys!"

The wheels scraped the rails. Mahon unsupported, fell against the fireplace but rolled clear without injury. There was a sickening thump, and the engine sagged forward and stopped abruptly.

"Missed it, be the powers!" snarled Murphy. "Another foot and we'd have kept the rails. They've put one over on us. Bally fools we were not to look for

it. How far's the foight away, it's hoofing it we are now."

A sputter of rifle fire burst from the woods and bullets rattled on the metal of engine and tender. No one was hurt, and the two Policemen silenced the fire immediately by returning it with surprising precision. A yell from the darkness told of a nip at least.

"Out behind the grade!" ordered Mahon. "I'll keep them down till you're covered."

A blaze from the trees, and he fired twice at it in rapid succession.

"And lave Mollie?" protested Murphy. "Not by a jugful!"

"To blazes with Mollie!" Mahon exploded, and threw the engineer through the cab door.

Murphy slowly picked himself up. "I see two foights on afther this one," he declared joyously. "And I'll lick the bohunk that stops a one o' thim, I will."

"Somebody st'ys with the engine, any'ow," muttered 'Uggins stubbornly. "'Ere, Murphy, we'll toss."

"What good's that?" asked Mahon. "It's human lives we're saving to-night, not engines."

"Gor lumme! Wots the use o' losin' the engine, too, I says. Any'ow, them rifles in there is more use to us 'ere than there at the trestle. An' I can't be savin' 'uman lives, women ones, in these togs."

Murphy climbed back into the cab. His purpose was the innocent one of letting off the rapidly ac-

cumulating steam; but Huggins was suspicious and followed closely.

"It's a toss, I tell yu," he insisted. "'Ere, len' me a tanner; I forgot my wallet."

Murphy extracted a coin from his pocket, and Huggins opened the fireplace door for light. There were to be no tricks in this toss. Three bullets thudded into the metal about them, but Murphy and his fireman were intent on a falling copper.

Huggins pulled his shirt back from the sucking draft of the flames. "'Eads!" he called.

The coin rattled to the floor and both men dropped to their knees. Another rifle tried for them.

"An' 'eads it is. I st'ys. Any'ow, it's warmer 'ere. Blimey, if them pants o' mine wasn't somethink to blow about after all. Sometimes it's the wind, then it's the bloomin' fire. I'll keep a bit o' steam up; looks as if I'll maybe need a bath when I get 'ome. S'long, ole sport! Tell Miss Tressa—" He broke into a convulsive chuckle, which another burst of rifle fire tried to interrupt. "Cripes! Wouldn't I 'a' been a d'isy for rescuin' lidies? Not 'arf!"

The farewell of the two men who ceaselessly fought and loved each other was nothing more than a pat on the back, Murphy's the more exuberant because it smacked louder on the thin shirt of the fireman. Then the latter was alone. "Mollie sends 'er love," he called into the darkness after the engineer.

For several minutes Huggins searched the tender for a comfortable spot for his unprotected body, but

scratchy, knobby pieces of wood, with a foundation of sharp chunks of coal, was not conducive to rest. A bullet rattling against the engine added to his irritation, and he looked over the edge and fired his revolver petulantly.

"That'll larn 'em I'm no blinkin' Irishman with a stick."

He crawled painfully to the very back of the tender and fired again.

"In case they thort the first was a misfire," he growled, "or fright." After a minute or two he began to grin. "Unless them bohunks is bigger fools than they need be, I guess yer friend 'Uggins is due for a rosy wreath from his friend Murphy when the sky clears."

He busied himself with a sputtering return fire to show he was still alive and prepared to exchange compliments. Between intervals of a vain search for something smooth and soft he expressed his feelings by a blind banging into the trees. At last he carefully wiped over the floor, settled himself against the entrance to the tender, and began to doze. A bullet struck close to his ear.

"Always the w'y," he groaned, moving back to safer quarters. "There's a fly in every hointment. An' we're as apt to 'it each other as a woman at a cokernut shy."

A distant burst of firing came down the breeze from toward the trestle. Huggins leaped to his feet and climbed to the pile of wood, and recklessly on to the top of the water tank.

“’Urray!” he yelled, dancing in the cold night air and blazing three shots into the woods. “The charge o’ the light brigade! Waterloo! Lidysmith! The Camperdown an’ orl the rest! Yu got no traditions, yu sneakin’ pups! If I ’it one o’ yu yu’d think of nothink but the quickest w’y ’ome.”

A bullet whistled past either ear, and he tumbled back into the tender, barking several fresh places on his sore body.

“Wots the use?” he growled. “They don’t understand. . . . Lidysmith don’t ’elp none if they ’it me, though she’s orl right for—for tradition. I better lie low an’ stop gassin’ ’istory. . . . Any’ow, ’Uggins wouldn’t sound right in ’istory.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SIEGE OF THE SHACK

'UGGINS' historical chatter was but a by-play. The others crept along under protection of the grade until they were clear of stray shots from the gang that had waylaid the engine. There they broke into a run, though Murphy complained bitterly at turning his back to a sure fight for one that might never come off. Four hundred yards from the trestle Mahon ordered them to wait.

He had no idea what might be happening in and about the shack, but he realised that only within its walls was his small force formidable. Only he and Williams possessed rifles. The revolvers of the others were of small service except at closer range than was apt to offer. He knew the bohunks well enough to feel certain that an attack at close quarters would be attempted only when defence was practically beaten down.

The silence told him that no immediate danger threatened; he did not doubt that the Indian was somewhere on guard. Uncertain, however, how closely the shack was invested, he crept carefully forward to reconnoitre.

It gave him time to canvass the situation. As far as the curve of the river behind the shack were too

few trees to cover serious attack from that direction. Probably the survey for the grade had chosen this line of contact between prairie and forest because of the small expense of clearing the right of way.

It was certain, therefore, that the danger lay in front, where the forest across the grade, and the elevation of the grade itself, protected the besiegers. The bohunks would be slow to expose themselves. Indeed, there was no need that they should, since escape was impossible. Not only was there nowhere to flee, but without its defenders the trestle would be at the mercy of the I.W.W.

Mahon did not trouble to speculate as to the end of the affair. His duty was to fight to the last, to protect life first and then the work of the contractors. Only when he remembered Tressa did his thoughts pass beyond the immediate future. Fortunately his wife, alone three miles away, did not enter his mind as a matter for anxiety.

Arrived within a stone's throw of the shack, and having heard no sound, he knew that his conclusions as to the disposition of the bohunks were correct. Swinging out wide of the grade, he skirted about in the darkness in search of isolated prowlers. The stable was reached without incident.

The late moon was rising, low still but clear enough to throw a dim light and touch the tops of the evergreen trees with a cold radiance so wild and pure that Mahon found it hard to believe in the perils urging him on. In an hour the light would be strong enough to expose movement within the danger zone, though

the size of the moon and a thin autumn mist limited it; and the low arc promised long shadows. Far to the south drifted the running echo of coyotes on the hunt, a shriek and a howl that never failed to stir the Sergeant's blood though he had lived with it for years. For a moment he longed for the old prairie life—the coyotes—the feeding cattle—the cowboys and the sweeping open spaces.

As he crawled from the stable to the back door a dim shadow moved round the corner of the shack and disappeared toward the trestle. Though no sound went with it, he was not alarmed. He challenged in a low voice. No reply. He stood erect to expose his uniform and called again. But the thing he had seen filtered into the vague moon shadows and was gone.

Knocking at the door, he waited for a reply. Not a sound reached him, yet he felt that ears were listening. He tried the latch, found it caught, and whispered his name. Immediately the door opened and Tressa Torrance seized his arm.

"All right here?" he enquired.

"Where's Adrian?" Calm and undisturbed was the tone, but he could feel her hand tremble on his arm.

"He'll be all right," he replied cheerily. "No mere bohunk ever got the better of Adrian Conrad. Who went out just now?"

"The Indian. He's been waiting for you."

"Oh!"

"Tell me, is it true—what he told us?"

"Only too true. They fired on us up the track."

She heaved a deep breath. "That was what we

heard. Nothing more. I was afraid— Conrad hasn't come. . . . And the Indian wouldn't let any one leave the shack."

He took her hands in his and held them tight. "Miss Torrance, much of the outcome of to-night depends on you. We're going to fight harder for you than for everything else lumped together. I must ask you to forget Adrian for the time being. May we trust you?"

Her reply was a return squeeze to the hands that held hers.

"I'll not flinch," she said. "But I'm not giving up hope."

He laughed. "Adrian will be proud of you."

He dropped her hand and turned back to the door. "Lock it behind me," he ordered. "In fifteen minutes exactly I'll knock twice. Open without a word. I have Williams and the train crew."

He found his companions lying where he had left them. Certain unmistakable signs of life among the trees over the grade they had heard, but that was all. Murphy was growling into the loose sand beneath his chin.

"Mother o' Mike! Why don't ye rush thim? There's bunches jist over there. Fir-rst thing ye know they'll get away. A good scr-rap going to waste, it is. And sure why are we lying here like a gang o' thieves? I got hould of a shillalah that fits me hand like a glove, glory be! The Lord put it there, He did. Sure He intinds me to use it. Mollie'd be ashamed o' me."

"You'll have your stomach full of fighting before you're through," promised Mahon.

"Be gad, I don't belave ye know an Oirishman's appetite at all."

"Keep low," ordered Mahon, crawling forward, "and quiet."

"The m'anest koind o' foighting I iver took a hand in, it is," grumbled Murphy, shaking the sand from his whiskers. But he fastened his eyes to the dim movement of Constable Williams' heels and crawled after him.

Thirty yards they had advanced on hands and knees, and Mahon was searching for a depression to lead off back of the shack, when Murphy whispered huskily:

"Any chance up there, Sergeant, o' nading a gun? 'Cause I left mine back there. But, praise be, I got the shillalah," he added brightly.

Mahon sighed. "You idiot! Lord"—to Constable Williams—"I'll be glad when I have him locked in. . . ."

A string of muttered oaths told them of Murphy's return.

"Another mouthful o' sand! Darn their hides! If iver I get me hands on a bohunk in this wor-rld again—" He spat noisily. "And all for a gun I don't know how to use. But it'll make a n'ise. Maybe it'll do to distract their attintion till I get me shillalah swinging."

Torrance received them with a burst of joy, shaking each by hand in turn, scarce knowing what he was doing.

"Keep an eye on Tressa," he cried, and made for the front door.

Mahon grabbed him. "Here, they have that door covered. Conrad will be all right. Anyway, it's throwing yourself away searching for him now."

"Conrad!" The contractor's bull voice was full of disgust. "Conrad to hell! It's the trestle."

Mahon swung him away with a rougher thrust than was necessary. "Damn the trestle! It's life we have to think of first."

"But it's the trestle they want. They're only keeping us in here—"

"Do as you're told. I'm in charge."

A rifle shot split the silence without. There followed a sharp cry of pain and a fusillade from the trees beyond the grade. The Indian was in action.

"Praise be!" chortled Murphy. "Somebody got it where it hurts. That Indian, he's a man afther me own hear-rt. Oh, mother, for me shillalah about the heads o' thim!"

Ten minutes of complete silence—fifteen. Murphy's impatience was becoming vociferous; he began to be jealous of Huggins up there with Mollie, with a fight at hand any time he wanted it. Torrance was scarcely less clamorous.

Relief came from a second shot from beside the trestle. And after it a cry as before, and a volley of wild firing. The Indian was wasting no shots; his night eyes were exacting toll.

Mahon decided to investigate. Also he wished to meet the Indian—to hear his voice—to touch him.

Leaving Williams in charge, with definite instructions as to Torrance and Murphy, he crept from the back door to the edge of the trestle. The Indian was not there. Mahon wondered how much of it was dream. Then the redskin was swept from his mind by the sound of life far below about the base of the trestle. The bohunks were attacking there.

He became aware of a strange creaking among the timbers reaching down into the blind depths. Suddenly a spurt of flame from their midst darted to the valley below. Mahon felt himself shiver at the death-shriek that replied. The Indian, somewhere far below his eye, was shooting now to kill. A dash of hasty feet told of momentarily defeated plans. A storm of bullets rattled from the trees among the timbers and whistled above Mahon's head as he lay under cover of the grade. Then a new peril startled him. Three rifles cracked in rapid succession from behind the stable.

For a moment Mahon thought of stalking them, but reflection decided him against it. It was a risk too great to justify exposing his life. For all it would gain at the best he, in charge of the defence, must not undertake it. And there was really no extra danger to the shack, since it could not be taken from the rear.

He wormed his way back more carefully through the kitchen door and reported what he had seen. Torrance, far from feeling gratitude for the Indian's defence of the trestle, fumed that it should be left to the care of any one but himself. In the midst of his

grumbling the first bullets struck the shack. They penetrated door and window and embedded themselves in the rear walls. But Mahon had disposed of the defenders with that peril in mind.

Of the eight Constable Williams and Murphy were stationed in the kitchen, with its one window and door. In Tressa's room, the point of least exposure, two of the crew were established. Torrance and another of the crew held the contractor's bedroom at the front. The living room Mahon himself, assisted by the last member of the crew, took in charge. Tressa carried messages, under strict orders to avoid exposure to window or door. One man in each pair was told off to co-operate with the defenders of any threatened point.

The weakness of the defence was the number of rifles. Torrance had two, the Policemen two. One rifle was given to each room; each of the eight had a revolver. Mahon was almost satisfied that the ammunition would last out any siege the bohunks were likely to undertake.

A few minutes' contemplation of the stable exposure convinced him that the attackers could gain nothing there. To fire the stable would only rob them of the sole protection to the rear, and, with what wind there was against it, fire would not spread to the house.

Standing to the left of the living room window while he reflected, he imagined a movement far down the grade. Immediately he fired. From Torrance's room came the thunder of his rifle. Evidently the bohunks were crossing the grade in numbers.

Thereafter nothing happened for half an hour but pointless and desultory potting. It promised nothing to the attackers and the defence was still intact. The windows were shattered, and by the tinkle of glass every picture and ornament in the room must have been smashed. From the trestle the silence was broken only twice. The Indian was saving his cartridges.

Suddenly a burst of five shots in quick succession warned Mahon that the Indian was alarmed. Recklessly the Sergeant looked through the window. From just beneath the sleepers that held the rails a jabbing flight of flashes pierced the darkness, pointing along the edge of the bank above the path leading up from Conrad's shack. A pause of only a moment—the Indian was filling his magazine—then another burst of the most rapid firing Mahon had ever heard from one rifle. Not a shot replied from the trees along the bank.

Mahon was puzzled. Was a big attack forming? Did the Indian see some threat of which those in the shack were unaware? Mahon issued sharp orders for increased vigilance. But why shoot in that direction to ward off concentrated attack?

The Indian's bullets continued to pour along the edge of the forest.

Mahon saw the idea. For some reason the bohunks were being driven temporarily to cover. Something—

The moon had moved a little over the top of the dark mass of trees. The grade was lit up. Mahon's

eyes ran back and forward along the twin bands of dimly reflecting steel.

A man leaped to the top of the grade from the other side, swayed a little, and plunged forward toward the shack. With the moon full on him in that first moment he loomed unnaturally huge. In a bound Mahon reached the door and threw it open.

"Conrad!" he shouted. "Quick!"

Adrian Conrad stumbled over the doorstep, laughed, and fell to the floor.

"'S all right," he cheered with a mad laugh. "Haven't got Adrian Conrad yet. Easy—there, Mahon! They've chewed me up—a bit—that rifle at the trestle—saved me." Then he fainted.

A voice that jerked Mahon erect came grimly from the grade.

"Shut that door, durn yuh! I can't keep 'em down all night."

Mahon was obeying mechanically when the Indian dashed through.

"Gor-swizzle, if he ain't the spunkiest chap I ever set eyes on. Jes' swaggered up that path like he was out fer a walk. . . . But plumb loco'ed! An' whistlin'! Oh, gor!"

The Sergeant leaned heavily against the table, staring into the darkness toward the familiar voice. He knew he was dreaming again, that haunting grief for his dead halfbreed friend had mastered him at last in a moment of excitement.

A cry of alarm from Torrance's room, and a suc-

cession of rifle shots, brought him to his senses. He hastened to investigate. Torrance had seen several men running across the grade. One dark lump on the ground gave proof. When he returned to the front room the Indian was still there.

"Any spare cartridges? I'm about cleaned out. Jes' two left. Gotta save them."

Mahon dropped a dozen in the extended hand. The Indian worked with them in the darkness for a moment and slammed them on the table with a curse.

"Shud 'a' knowed they wudn't fit. Where's Torrance's?"

But Torrance's likewise were the wrong size, and the Indian disappeared into Tressa's room. The brakesman entrusted with a rifle in that room paid no attention until a strong hand wrenched it from him.

"Yuh'll hurt yerself, sonny, playin' with a real gun. Yuh can have all I shoot to eat."

When he returned to the living room, Mahon laid a hand on his shoulder.

"My God, who are you?"

A moment of silence, then: "Me Indian; no pale-face name."

Torrance rushed from the bedroom.

"Is that the Indian? Good Heavens! The trestle—the trestle!"

He had thrown wide the front door and gone before they could interfere. A hail of bullets came through. Keener eyes among the trees picked out Torrance's running bulk, but their eyes were keener than their

aim. The contractor reached the grade and threw himself between the rails, and with head overhanging the abyss below stared through the sleepers into the thinning darkness about the feet of his beloved trestle.

Mottled clouds were dimming the moon. Mahon, peering from the window, could make out only the slight bulk above the rails that marked the place where the contractor lay. A moment later a spot of light sank from beneath him—lower and lower, until it dropped beyond the edge of the bank.

"Me go too," muttered the Indian.

A volley greeted the opening of the door, but the Indian chose the moment when it had dropped away and crawled out.

Torrance was lying on his face, an electric flash dropping at the end of a long cord. As it fell, the bones of the trestle came into view stage after stage and passed upward.

The Indian chuckled. "Durn good!"

"Somebody's got to do something durn good," Torrance returned sulkily.

"Somebody looks as if he'll do some dyin' durn good. Yuh're a bit thick in the breadbasket fer them rails, ain't yuh?"

Torrance flattened himself until he grunted, for bullets were splattering about the dropping light. In a few moments the bohunks understood. They turned their attention then to the top of the trestle.

CHAPTER XXIX

RETRIBUTION BEGINS

As long as Torrance held himself flat on the sleepers he was safer than the Indian supposed. The grade was several feet above the forest floor, and the hundred-pounds rails were almost sufficiently high to provide what further protection was necessary so long as he did not raise any part of his body. But lying still was against every precedent. Torrance felt an uncontrollable desire to curse the bohunks with appropriate gesture, to jeer at them when they missed him, to return their fire when the bullets struck unpleasantly close to his ears on the ringing steel.

But when one made a rumpling dart through his hair, and another exacted tribute from a vengeful finger, he concluded that vengeance might well await a safer opportunity. So he hugged the rails, though his face was red with shame.

When two hours of aimless fighting had spent themselves and daylight was promising, Mahon began to take stock. Would the light of day impose an end? He was not hopeful. The bohunks knew there was no relief for the besieged, day or night, unless a supply train came through. That contingency Koppy would no doubt have provided for by tearing up the track to east and west. And to drop the siege would not

save the leaders. The Sergeant knew now that the attack had long been in plan, and every chance would be provided for. Daylight would make no difference, except that the bohunks would be more careful of their cover. Chagrin that he had not read their plans, and concern for the effect of daylight, were not his only emotions. Also there came for the first time twinges of uncertainty as to the outcome. It was a matter of life and death to the leaders of the attack to see that it was maintained until accidental hits, lack of ammunition, fear, or the hopelessness of prolonged resistance, induced the defenders to surrender. The Sergeant wished now that he had sent Williams off to try and reach the ticker at Mile 135, or to make a break for help from the western camps. But Koppy would certainly have cut the wires, and any attempt to go for help would only have weakened the defence. The Pole had proven his brains by the precautions they already knew of; he would probably omit few.

The Indian called to him from the grade, and Mahon unlatched the door and let him in. Grabbing another handful of cartridges, the Indian got the stable key and dashed away through the back door. A moment after he disappeared in the stable the two defenders of the kitchen saw a pair of bohunks run out into the dim morning light and make at mad speed for the few trees that grew in the bend of the river. Even as Constable Williams was taking aim, the man covered fell to a bullet from the stable. The other, apparently beyond the angle of the Indian's range, seemed certain to escape. The Policeman rested his

rifle on the window sill. But Murphy gave a joyous whoop and started for the door.

"Glory be, I see some one to foight at last!"

Williams was forced to drop his rifle and catch the excited Irishman in his arms. And the bohunk disappeared into the dimness of the morning.

The Indian, having freed the stable of lurkers, returned to the kitchen. But not for long. A burst of rifle fire in a new direction sent him hastily out again beside the trestle. The men who had retired from the stable before his rifle had discovered a way to the river bottom in the rear and were now from below potting at the recumbent contractor through the sleepers.

Daylight had come suddenly, as it does in the West. The glare of the sun was rising above the trees, and over the snap of the rifles rang the songs of birds. The shack stood fully exposed in the open, while the attackers slunk in the protection of the trees.

As the Indian ran for his old place beside the grade at the end of the trestle bullets whistled about him. Peering over the edge, he saw a bohunk kneeling below, taking careful aim through the sleepers at the outstretched form of the contractor. A bullet from the Indian's rifle caught him full in the neck, and his companions hauled his limp body back under the bank. Thereafter they fired with greater circumspection and poorer aim.

Mahon set his mind seriously now to the problem that faced them. To lie there seemed fruitless; to attack supreme folly. Yet, in the way of the Police,

he did not lose hope. Had there been no helpless girl to consider! And that, combined with a growing hunger, brought his mind round again to Helen. Strange how far away she seemed, how much a part of another life! And yet she was only three miles distant. She would be worrying, wondering. If the bohunks should decide to explore the village now! He fought his fears with a memory of Helen's competence to protect herself. She could outshoot any bohunk.

A volley of curses from Torrance directed Mahon's eyes to the trestle. The bohunks had attacked at last! The contractor was struggling madly with two of them! Mahon searched anxiously for the Indian, but he was far up the grade now, shooting among the trees. Torrance was fighting it out alone on that dizzy height.

As the light broke, Ignace Koppowski, too, took stock. He knew he had only to maintain the siege long enough to win; but he also realised that his followers had little stomach for a long struggle. The rising sun, too, was against every precedent as a time to attack authority. The doctrine of his kind was to stab in the dark, to hit and run—a foundation on which was based the successes of his organisation.

As he reviewed the risk of failure through nothing but the cowardice of his men, he found himself hating them with an intensity he could scarcely conceal. The transition from that to an appreciation of his own superiority was natural enough. Perhaps not so natural, a return of the twinges of conscience that

had been afflicting him of late at inopportune moments. When he realised the existence of these thoughts, he read in them only weakening nerve, and to steady himself he moved about among his followers, cheering them on. But the glowering, vacillating looks he received here and there succeeded in impressing him only with the extent of his responsibility. Success in this, his grandest effort, assumed monstrous proportions. He dare not fail. Present and future demanded that.

Grimly he summoned his lieutenants to a hasty conference, not to hear quakings or objections, but to give and receive the stimulus necessary to wage the battle to the bitter end.

Werner hesitatingly advised raising the siege. In former tilts with the Mounted Police during his trapping days he had experienced their intrepidity, the hopelessness of winning against them in the long run.

"Oh?" Koppy gloomed at him beneath heavy eyebrows, giving little clue to the thoughts behind. "What next?"

What he really meant was of what profit to the leaders to yield now. Werner's keen wits read it. Volubly he suggested a rearguard of the better fighters to cover the retreat of the leaders and the rest; the besieged would not dare press them.

In reality a personal inspiration lay behind it all. Werner himself would creep away west and join himself to one of the construction gangs where questions were not asked. He could await his chance of slipping

across the border to the States. His idea of geography was somewhat hazy.

Koppy listened to the end with veiled eyes. He read Werner much more accurately than Werner read him. But most poignantly of all he realised the hopelessness of submission, at least for the leaders. There was nothing now but to carry the fight through—no other hope for himself. Also he discovered a fresh goad in his hatred of Werner.

When the latter had completed his plan, Koppy suddenly dropped his hand from his face. Werner saw and collapsed. For several seconds Koppy held the coward's faltering eyes, then turned with disgust to the others.

"What will we do with him?"

Morani's knife slid down his wrist and swished across his boot leg. And the others looked agreement.

Werner shuddered—began to bluster.

"You asked what I thought. I told you. I didn't mean to give the whole thing up—not much I didn't." He drew his hand across his dripping forehead. "We'll get the trestle yet—and it's that we want, isn't it? Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll lie around and blow it up myself, if I have to spend the whole winter here."

Koppy broke into an insulting laugh. "You! And the trestle ain't all we want. Who pays for last night's deaths? You blow up the trestle! What about Mr. Conrad? You let him escape."

Werner saw difficulties accumulating beyond his oft-

tried powers of evasion. He stammered a disconnected tale of bad luck, wiping his face repeatedly. Koppy waved it aside.

"Morani," he ordered solemnly, "watch him. If he tries to escape—" A swift downward stroke completed the command. "We'll settle with him later."

Werner paled. He knew what the settlement would be, and the justice of it. He knew, too, the folly of protesting under the strain of the moment. So he tried to look aggrieved at their suspicions. When the conference broke up, and Morani attached himself to his heels, he smiled ingratiatingly and sauntered to the edge of the bank overlooking the camp. There he seated himself to consider his position. Escape? Even if he succeeded in evading immediate doom by giving his guard the slip, the I.W.W. would never give up the chase till he had paid the penalty of his treason.

As he sat he could see the end of the trestle through the brush. A slight bulge above the rails marked the place where the contractor lay guarding his pet. At the sight a wave of fury against Torrance swept over Werner. The boss was to blame for everything. But for his vigilance the trestle would long ago have been down.

"Chico," he snarled, "watch me pink him."

He lay along the ground and rested his rifle on a rock. But Morani, having suffered helplessly for a whole season at the hands of this nimble-tongued comrade, saw his chance. Before Werner realised his plan, the Italian laid one long supple hand on the stock

and wrenched it away. In his left hand gleamed the hovering stiletto.

"No rifle," he rasped. "I watch-a you better." He held the gun behind his back.

For a mad moment Werner thought of hurling himself on his leering enemy, but the knife waved before his eyes. No chance there. An overwhelming sense of hopelessness, of friendlessness, sent him cringing to Morani's feet. The Italian, gloating, leaned forward and prodded with the stiletto. Werner, beside himself now with terror, leaped up and ran a few yards. But the smirking face of the Italian followed. In that direction lay speedy death.

Trembling, Werner sank to his knees like a whipped dog. On his knees he crept on and on. And above him hung those gloating eyes and the threatening stiletto. Urged by that smirk of death the cowering man crept forward. There was blood now on his torn knees and hands, but he did not feel it. Only he must crawl on and on before the horrible Nemesis at his back.

Neither noticed where their path led. They reached the end of the trees. The open ahead promised Werner greater freedom of flight. Morani was blind to everything but the terror of his old enemy. With twisted head Werner moved out from the trees. Something loomed before him, blocking the way. A wall of loose sand! With a gasp he raised his eyes.

Above him loomed the five-foot grade, protecting them from the shack. Werner shifted his horror-stricken eyes only a little—and looked straight into

those of the contractor staring through the sleepers. Torrance was moving his rifle to take aim.

Below Werner fell a dizzy depth. Above him the rifle of one who had no reason to spare. The double peril added the touch that makes craven spirits desperate.

With a scream of mad fury he leaped to his feet and charged up the loose sand of the grade. And Morani, suddenly conscious of where he was, and of Werner's chance of escape, gripped his stiletto and dug his toes into the pits Werner had made.

CHAPTER XXX

KOPPY PAYS

KOPPY, under the impetus of the conference, set his mind more firmly to the problem facing him. Under the present method of attack the outcome was a question of endurance. And in endurance the disposition of the besieged was an enormous factor to offset the hopelessness of rescue or escape. So long as they remained within the shack they could come to little harm, if food, water, and ammunition held out.

Exposed to the rifles of the besiegers were, however, two of their principal foes. The Indian dashed recklessly from post to post. Sooner or later he would pay for it. The continued impunity of the boss was more maddening. Above the rails Koppy could see the slight bulge on which so many shots had been wasted. Probably it was only Torrance's clothing. From the floor of the forest he seemed to be reasonably protected.

Koppy raised his eyes. With a smile he selected a thick-stemmed tree and, with the aid of willing and suddenly excited hands, lifted himself to the lower boughs. There, leaning against the trunk, a circle of projecting boughs about him, he laughed. Torrance lay in full view. Gloatingly Koppy slid his rifle along a convenient branch, took aim, and fired. The ring of metal told how close he was.

On his followers below he bent malignantly joyful eyes. It was only a question of time now.

The next bullet must have touched Torrance's shoulder, for he winced and edged closer to the near rail. Koppy cheered and recklessly waved his rifle.

A shot snapped from over the grade, and a piece of bark flicked stingingly into the Pole's face. The surprise of it almost tumbled him from his perch. And before he could cover himself completely with the trunk of the tree a second bullet whipped through the leaves so close to his eyes that he felt the wind of it.

Across the grade the Indian jerked in his rifle with an oath and ran to the shack.

"Dang rotten toy!" he sputtered, slamming the borrowed gun on the table. "Gi' me my own. I got two cartridges left. One'll do. Thar ain't no better place for it."

The crowd beneath Koppy's perch was growing fast. The Pole could hear their whispered exclamations, see the whites of their faces turned up to him for the report of each shot. In a wave of anger and misgiving he realised the rashness of adding another responsibility to those of leadership. Only too eagerly they were piling on his solitary shoulders the whole burden of the fight.

He must kill the boss! He must kill the boss!

It ran through his head like a threat—a dirge. His aim wavered. Bullet after bullet sped harmlessly about Torrance. A cold sweat broke out on the Pole. He leaned out to order others into the surrounding trees—but realised as he glowered into their upturned

faces that this was no time for orders, but for action.

He reported a hit—boasted, shouted, forced himself to laugh exultantly.

Where would it all end?

He gripped his fists until the nails bit into his palms, and took a fresh hold of himself. With set teeth, steadier than he had ever been, he thrust the rifle out again along the branch.

At that instant Werner clambered up the grade—and close behind him Morani.

Koppy gasped. A flash of pride at the unexpected temerity of two of his lieutenants. But it faded swiftly before two driving fears. Torrance had risen to meet them; and Koppy knew the force of that great fist. But if his own men won! Koppy had a vision of vanished glory—of lost leadership. Morani and Werner had taken their lives in their hands to accomplish that which he was failing to do from the protection of a tree.

Snapping his teeth together, he put his eye coolly to the rear sight. If his own men were in the way—well, that was their lookout. He was aiming at Torrance.

A hush fell over the forest. From the foot of the tree the bohunks read crucial drama in Koppy's manner. . . .

With a bellow of rage Torrance was on his feet. A single blow he struck at Werner's mad eyes. The head before him snapped back, the bent legs crumpled. As if he had been shot, Werner's limp body slid backwards down the sand. For a moment it hung balanced

over the edge, then bent slowly over and plunged out of sight.

Morani, alone now but forced to carry it through, struck swiftly. Torrance managed to take the point of the stiletto on his left arm. With his right he grabbed the Italian's arm and jerked sideways and down. A sickening snap, and Morani's dark face went a sickly cream. Without changing his hold, Torrance flung out sideways, as a petulant child discards a doll that has lost favour. Morani had never a chance. Lifted clear of the trestle, he pitched headlong into the chasm.

But in the effort Torrance's foot slipped. He tried to drop to save himself, but too late. Clawing at the ends of the sleepers, he fell over the way Morani had gone. The breath in a hundred throats held. Mahon closed his eyes.

But in the scramble the contractor's right leg fell between the sleepers, and as his body turned for the final plunge, his foot caught and held. The leg snapped, but it held. Torrance's head, swinging down outside the trestle, crashed into one of the supports. And there he hung, unconscious.

In the fleeting moments of the triple tragedy Koppy could not pull the trigger. But as the boss lay motionless in the open, an evil smile came to the Pole's face. Closing his left eye, he took firm hold of the stock of his rifle and set his finger to the trigger.

Something passed swiftly across the sights. He opened both eyes and raised his head. Tressa Tor-

rance was climbing fearlessly out on the trestle supports to her father's assistance, calling for help.

Koppy gasped. A veil seemed to fall over his eyes. A drop of sweat fell to his rifle butt. When he could see once more he slowly drew back the gun, eyes staring. Slowly he turned to the expectant faces below him. They knew nothing of what had happened—was happening—out there on the trestle. But they felt in some vague way that he was failing them.

With deliberation Koppy shifted his rifle about, reversing it. Wonder began to dawn on the faces at the foot of the tree, but not a sound came from them. Coolly and firmly the butt slid out along the branch where the barrel had been.

He felt steadier now—no nerves—no fears. With unhurried care he caught the trigger over a twig and let it rest there. His head turned slowly about in a half circle, not toward the crowd below but out over the green forest and up into the brightening sky. Then he leaned out and peered at the shack. Moving back in the arc, his eyes rested on Tressa supporting her father's head, though a false step meant certain death.

And Ignace Koppowski smiled—a cleaner, more human smile than had crossed his face for many a year.

“Good girl!” he shouted. “I’ll help. Listen.”

With the smile still on his lips he jerked the barrel of the rifle toward him.

With the explosion came another from across the

grade. And before the first echo two others from the forest behind.

Koppy's body crashed through the branches and fell among his gaping followers.

There was blood now, more than they wished. It spurted over them from their fallen leader. It welled from a shrieking companion who lay twisting on the ground beside their dead leader.

One incredulous moment—then, clutching and clawing, but silent as ever in their fears, they ran for the camp, the only haven they knew. The panic spread through the rest out among the trees. And a trail of weapons marked their course.

From a growth of shrub a woman in an Indian blanket peered toward the grade. She saw the Indian standing there furiously snapping his empty rifle after the fleeing bohunks. And with a smile she faded away.

Westward, along the grade, from the shadows Helen Mahon stepped, rifle in hand. In a puzzled way she looked first toward the spot where the squaw had fired from. Then she ran for the trestle.

When she reached it Torrance's body lay on the grade. Mahon, at the sound of her feet, swung about and held out his arms.

"Darling," he murmured, "you saved us. You haven't lost your aim."

But she shook her head. "I fired to frighten. Some one else—"

They carried the limp body within the shack and

laid it tenderly on the couch. There was still life, and they worked with prayers on their lips. . . .

From outside broke two sharp whistles. Mahon, with a puzzled frown, looked from the front door. An awkward little broncho was trotting past the corner of the house toward the stable.

Williams came to him. "I'm afraid it's no use, sir," he whispered. "Nothing could stand up under that."

Mahon appealed to his wife. "Help us, Helen, it's got past us."

The sudden thunder of hoofs along the river side of the shack drew the two Policemen to the door. Three horses, the broncho in the lead, were climbing the grade. The broncho started out on the trestle, head bent, measuring each step, moving from sleeper to sleeper. And at its heels, obedient as sheep, were Torrance's two horses.

Six hundred yards of open trestle before the fill-in at the other side! Mahon held his breath. . . .

"Mother o' Mike!" The horses had trotted out to safety, and Murphy was capering gleefully about.

Mahon rushed to the corner of the shack and looked about. The Indian was nowhere in sight.

Helen, with wet cheeks, was bathing the white face of the contractor. Tressa, searching Helen's eyes for hope, saw it vanish in those tears. With a crooning cry she sank beside the couch and lifted her father's head in her arms.

"Daddy! Daddy, speak to me!"

But the face was the face of the dead.

Stooping, she gently brushed her father's lips with her own, as her mother had done in the days of long ago.

"'Jim!'" she whispered. "'Jim!'"

The eyelids quivered and parted, and the eyes beneath looked vaguely through.

"Mary!" he murmured. Then a sigh. "It hurts—so." One limp hand trembled to his bruised head. "All right, Mary!" Then in a stronger voice: "All right, Mary, I'll stay."

The film passed from before his sight.

"By hickory, Tressa, I thought I was dead—and Mary was taking me in hand. She can get along without me, she says, but you can't. But you needn't tell Adrian. Where's my pipe?"

Murphy was capering about the room, whooping and rubbing his eyes. The injured man fixed him with stern gaze.

"Murphy, what are you doing here, making a fool of yourself at this hour? Don't you know you're due at the gravel pit in less than two hours? That fill-in commences to-day—no matter what's happened."

But Murphy was already far up the grade, brandishing his shillalah and shouting at the top of his voice:

"'Uggins! 'Uggins! I'm coming."

CHAPTER XXXI

BLUE PETE RETURNS

INSPECTOR Barker drummed on his desk.

"Bert, of the 3-bar-Y, has turned up, Priest tells me."

Sergeant Mahon managed to stifle outward evidence of the thrill that sent his blood tingling. He did not reply. "Don't mangle your brains over it, Boy. You've been in the Police long enough to add two and two."

Still no reply.

"While you're digesting it, bite on this: Most of the horses Dutch Henry and Bilsy stole last fall are back in their owners' hands."

Mahon began to laugh happily. "I'll stake my life that every one Blue Pete stole—every one that's alive, anyway—is among them."

"You're coming along, Boy . . . but just a bit too fast. Try and take this standing: Blue Pete never stole a horse after he left the Police!"

Mahon's brows met in surprise.

"No, I'm not crazy," grinned the Inspector. "I'm not even trying to delude myself. . . . And he never was such a friend of mine as you thought he was of yours."

Mahon controlled himself to formality. "I'll go

out and find him, sir, if you say so, and let him tell his own story."

"You'll find him when it pleases him to be found."

"If you don't mind, sir, I'd like to get back to the Lodge right away. I feel as if I need ranchers and cowboys to remove the taste of that north country from my mouth."

A slow smile crept into the Inspector's face.

"I imagine it'll please him to be found—and by you," he said.

As the door was closing behind the Sergeant, the grey-haired man threw a parting word: "Take my advice, Boy, and don't do any adding till Blue Pete gives you the figures. If the addition's unpleasant then . . . wait till I add for you."

Mahon covered the thirty miles to the Police post at Medicine Lodge without a rest. A fever of uncertainty was consuming him. The Inspector's faith in the halfbreed made the whole uncanny affair a deeper mystery than ever. For eight months Blue Pete had been "on the run," and then had come the great sacrifice they had all believed—at least all but the Inspector—to be his death. During those eight months the Sergeant himself had traced northward the horses the halfbreed had stolen. He had actually caught Mira Stanton, Blue Pete's partner, in the act of rustling.

Yet, insisted the Inspector, the halfbreed was not rustling. Mahon gave it up.

Ahead of him loomed, the dark line of the beloved

Hills, swelling as he cantered along. Over the yellow glare of the dead prairie grass his eyes rested on the deep green with the affection of a long-absent friend. There swept over him an irrepressible longing to dash into the cool shadows and feast his eyes on the maze of hill and dell, rocky height and grass-grown bottom, mirrored lake and whispering stream; to hear the leap of fish and the rustle of creeping things unseen, the cry of distant birds and the howl of prowling wolf. There he would be in touch with the spirit of his old friend, wherever he might be now.

Some day—he felt certain of it—he would grasp the hand of Blue Pete somewhere within the Hills.

Constable Priest was not at the post when he pushed open the barracks door. He was glad of that. Leaving a short note, he galloped off south-east toward the Hills. His horse, with memories of many a free run there, made straight for Windy Coulee, the familiar western entrance to the mysteries of the Cypress Hills.

Mahon did not direct. When the sloping trail leading up into the trees rose before him, he smiled. With Windy Coulee the halfbreed's memory was bound by a hundred incidents. There they had entered their first great adventure together; there they had dived into the shadows on the trail of many a rustler. And there he had erected the rough stone that marked his grief when he thought Blue Pete had given his life for him.

Wrapped in the past, Mahon gave the horse his head.

At the top of the hollowed trail, just where the trees

began, the horse came to a halt so suddenly that Mahon jerked against the pommel and lifted his eyes in surprise.

Not thirty yards ahead stood the granite column with its simple tribute, "Greater Love." But Mahon did not notice it. All he saw was a man slouched on its pedestal. He was smiling at him—a twisted, awkward smile of embarrassed affection.

Mahon's lips parted, but he could not speak. With unsteady hand he quieted the impatient horse—blinking incredulously. There were the high cheek bones, the bluish tinge—darker now—the pleading smile, the leather chaps and dirty Stetson and polka dot neckerchief and huge spurs, there the coarse brown hands hanging limply over the leather-clad knees. Two changes had come—one shoulder hung lower than its mate, and the stiff black hair was tidier. The first, he knew, was the result of the old wound; the last the outward token of a woman's care.

"Pete!"

He breathed the beloved name without knowing that he spoke.

The grin on the dusky face widened, the big hands rubbed each other in confusion. For several seconds they faced each other thus. Suddenly the halfbreed whistled twice, and out from the trees trotted an ugly little pinto. Its right ear turned forward for Mahon's familiar welcome, the left, struggling to follow, fell away grotesquely in its upper half. But the weirdly coloured blotches that made it a pinto were unlike any colour of living hide; and the pinto seemed to feel it.

"Whiskers ain't quite got back 'spectable yet, Boy," grinned Blue Pete. "I sure dosed her fer fair up thar among them bohunks, an' she's hangin' her head a bit. But she's the same ole gal, ain't yuh, Whiskers?"

He whistled again. The pinto sank to the ground and lay as motionless as the rocks about.

"Ain't lost a trick, not a dang one. An' she knows yuh, Boy. Yuh ain't changed—not 's much as me. . . . But I'm sure the same old Blue Pete."

Mahon dug cruel spurs into his horse's sides. Throwing himself from the saddle, he seized the half-breed's hand and held it in both his own without a word. A great tear gathered on either eyelid. Blue Pete laughed in shamefaced happiness and dropped his squinting eyes.

And the pinto tore to shreds the rule of a lifetime: she clambered to her feet without orders and reached up to nibble at the edge of Mahon's Stetson. The Sergeant threw an arm about her neck and pressed his face to the yellow blotch below the left eye. . . .

As the evening shadows from the Hills lay long across the prairie, and the birds chirped sleepily, Mahon stood up with a sigh.

"You'll have to come in to the barracks, Pete. I—I can't help it."

"Get goin'," grinned the halfbreed.

The Sergeant bent over his girth with flushed face.

"I have no idea what's in store for you, Pete. The Inspector has a lot of faith in you."

Blue Pete studied him quizzically. "More'n you have?"

"I don't know. Oh, I don't understand."

A shadow of pain came into the halfbreed's face. "I wudn't try then," he said shortly. And Mahon remembered that the Inspector had advised the same.

When they had been riding a long time the halfbreed spoke wistfully. "I wasn't rustlin', Boy. All I did was to take from Duchy and Bilsy some o' the horses they rustled. If I hadn't, yuh wudn't 'a' seed 'em ever again. I've got 'em all back—all I took from them. . . . An' I ain't chargin' nothin' fer it neither."

Mahon thought it all out laboriously.

"But you stole them again from Torrance."

"Sure! Torrance knowed they was stole. He wudn't 'a got any other kind fer ten bucks. Yuh don't call that rustlin'?"

Mahon smiled—the halfbreed's code was so simple.

"Tell it to the Inspector like that," he pleaded.

"Sure I will! An' I know dang well *he'll* see."

Inspector Barker lifted frowning eyes to the opening door. Stiff, waiting for permission to enter, Sergeant Mahon stood looking at him from the hall. A brown hand reached forward from behind and pushed him aside. And there was the grinning face of the halfbreed.

The Inspector cleared his throat huskily. The proper thing, he knew, was to look severe, but the lines wouldn't form in the right places. Hungrily the halfbreed's eyes roamed to the tobacco pouch spilled on the blotter; the old corncob pipe was fumbling expectantly in his big fist.

"Same baccy, Inspector?" he enquired innocently, stepping through the door.

The lines in the Inspector's face were getting out of hand entirely. In another moment—

He swung fiercely on the Sergeant.

"Get out!" he snapped; and slammed the door in his face.

THE END.

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